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TEFILLIN

THE ULTIMATE MITZVAH

By Rabbi Heschel Greenberg

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FOREWORD

With praise to the A-mighty and with His assistance I am publishing this treatise “Tefillin-The Ultimate Mitzvah on the significance of the Mitzvah of Tefillin, the Mitzvah that is especially connected to a Bar Mitzvah. On his thirteenth birthday—and in Chabad tradition two

months prior—the Bar Mitzvah boy declares his entry into Jewish responsibility by putting on Tefillin.

This treatise is being published in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of my dear grandson Hillel Greenbergשיחי' and will be distributed, G-d willing, to you, the attendants of His Bar Mitzvah celebration, as a token of appreciation for your friendship and your being part of our extended family.

* * *

The entire concept of a Bar-Mitzvah (the same applies to a Bas Mitzvah as well) has been sadly misunderstood. It is not the end of a Jewish child's Jewish education, but the beginning of a more intense connection to his or her Judaism. The very word Bar-Mitzvah means that the boy is now of age of obligation to observe all of the commandments. A Bar Mitzvah does not require reading from the Torah or having a party or giving a speech. It is primarily about the recognition that a Jew is always a Bar or Bas Mitzvah, because a Jew is always obligated to fulfill his or her responsibilities to G-d and is or her fellow.

There is no more dramatic way to underscore the Bar Mitzvah boy's introduction and induction to a new and more advanced phase of his life than by putting on Tefillin every week day.

The greatest gift a parent or a friend can give a Bar Mitzvah boy and beyond is a pair of Tefillin. In Jewish sources, this one Mitzvah carries more weight than all of the ceremonies and rituals associated with a Bar Mitzvah.

When we read of how Jews risked their lives to smuggle Tefillin into Nazi death camps, or in the Soviet Gulags, it must inspire us to a more profound understanding of what Tefillin mean for the Jewish people and why Tefillin have endured throughout the ages in the most trying of conditions.

The following text is intended to explain some of the unique qualities associated with the Mitzvah of Tefillin, with the fervent hope and prayer that it encourages many to begin fulfilling this beautiful Mitzvah and it enhances its observance for those who already perform it.

By Divine Providence, this book comprises twenty chapters. That is significant because the number 20 is associated with the concept of a crown. In Hebrew the word for 20 is esrim, which is numerically equivalent to keser, which means crown. Also, the letter chof is used

as a symbol for the number 20 and it is also the initial of the word keser.

The connection to Tefillin is that Tefillin are referred to as our crown, a concept that will be elaborated on in the text.

* * *

Some of the material here is based on the preface to the Hebrew work, P'er Hamelech, a commentary on Maimonides' Laws of Tefillin, I was privileged to publish in honor of my son Rabbi Yehoshua שיחי' Greenberg's Bar Mitzvah 28 years ago. It is with profound feelings of gratitude to the A-mighty that he has enabled me to publish this new work in honor of his and his אשת חיל Brocha Leah תחי' son Hillel's Bar Mitzvah.

I am indebted to Ben and Sherry Fittשיחיו for editing the text as well as for their continued friendship and support. May the merit of assisting to promulgate the importance of the Mitzvah of Tefillin provide them and their family with G-d's abundant blessings in all that they need, materially and spiritually.

Special thanks to my dear son-in-law Rabbi Peretz Mockin שיחי' for the cover design and to my dear son Rabbi Yehoshua Greenberg שיחי' for his assistance in the research for many of the sources in this book.

* * *

Finally, as we stand on the very threshold of the Final Redemption through our righteous Moshiach, for which the Jewish people have prayed and yearned for close to two thousand years, every Mitzvah can be the one Mitzvah that brings an end to the exile with all of its suffering that plagues all of humanity. Of all the Mitzvos, Tefillin arguably, stands out as a powerful force that will break through all the barriers of exile. May we see this unfold, imminently, now!

Rosh Chodesh Elul, 5773

Heschel Greenberg

Buffalo, New York

The famed Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev was a renowned lover and a defender of Jews. He once “challenged” G-d: "Master of the world, you must forgive Israel their sins. If you do this--good. But if not I'll tell all the world that the Tefillin you wear are invalid. What's the verse enclosed in your Tefillin? 'Who is like your people Israel, a unique nation on earth?' If you don't forgive Israel Your Tefillin are invalid."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak cried to G-d upon seeing the suffering of the Jewish people, “Master of the World, if a Jew would drop his Tefillin he would quickly pick them up, clean them, caress and kiss them. The Jewish People are Your Tefillin, and we have fallen to the ground. Please, lift us up. Clean us off, kiss us, and hold us close to Your heart. Take us out of exile now!”

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: THE ANATOMY OF A MITZVAH

A Good Deed?

The Mitzvah of Tefillin is one of the 613 Biblical commandments. Before embarking on a discussion about the significance of the Mitzvah of Tefillin, it is important that we first define the word Mitzvah. The simple and most basic translation of the word is “commandment.”

Colloquially, the word Mitzvah has been translated as a good deed. No one can argue that a Mitzvah is a good deed. The question is: Is something a Mitzvah because it is a good deed, or is it a good deed because it is a Mitzvah? In fact, as we shall see, the ultimate determination of which actions are deemed good is the Mitzvah. If a certain course of action is a Mitzvah, then, by definition, it is a good deed. If it is not a Mitzvah then it is not a good deed. One cannot conceptually imagine an act that is objectively good that has not been ordained by G-d. The reason a Mitzvah is a good deed is because it is G-d’s will. A G-dly act is a goodly act and every good act we must assume has been ordained by G-d.

What about the Virtuous Atheist?

At this point, one can almost hear the protest of the atheist who claims that religion has no monopoly on goodness. There have been so many atheists who have shown tremendous kindness and have done so much to help the world. The atheist will buttress his argument with the reality of the existence of so many believers who have done so much evil.

The atheist does not realize that by citing the evil perpetrated by believers he actually has provided a refutation of his first argument—the kindness and goodness of atheists.

How can a person who believes in G-d—and presumably in the Torah's commandment not to steal, to love your neighbor, etc.—still commit those very acts? The answer is that people can and will often behave contrary to their own beliefs. The Talmud tells of a thief who, on the threshold of the home he is about to break into, pauses to recite a heartfelt prayer to G-d that he will be successful in his endeavor…

Is the thief a hypocrite?

Absolutely not!

If he was dishonest about his belief in G-d, why would he utter a prayer when there is no one around to hear him recite it and be impressed with his feigned piety?

Then, why does he pray if the G-d to whom he is praying utterly detests his criminal behavior?

The answer is that humans are not mono-dimensional creatures. We are multi-layered creatures. In addition to our faith, which dwells on the periphery of our personality, we have objective reasoning and, more importantly, animal cravings and tendencies. Sometimes we act with disregard to logic when we want something badly, as does a little child. The animal in us overpowers logic and eclipses our faith. The power of the internal animal is so great that at times it can actually cause our minds to rationalize bad behavior if that is what our animal nature desires. Moreover, it can turn genuine faith into an instrument of crime.

The thief may have faith in G-d; the problem lies in being able to translate that faith into practice.

In a similar—but opposite—vein, it can be said that if the atheist would use pure logic and allow his animal tendencies to totally dominate his behavior, there would be nothing that would stop him from getting what he wants. The "problem" is that the atheist also

possesses a G-dly spark that demands of him to do only good. The atheist will call it his conscience, or a genetic predisposition to goodness, but no matter how it is phrased, there is another part of the atheist that goes against his or her purported atheism and compels him or her to do that which is good.

If the atheist were to be governed by pure atheistic principles, then there would be nothing in life that could be termed good or bad; just likes and dislikes.

Of course, the atheist might even use self-interest and self-preservation to do good. But atheism, in and of itself, does not dictate good behavior principally because in atheism there is no such thing as objective good, right or wrong.

Furthermore, atheists will be good frequently because they had a parent or grandparent or other dynamic figure in their life that did good and inculcated that good in them.

Historically speaking, all notions of good began with people who were believers. Atheism arrived on the scene after notions of good had become pervasive and internalized into the psyche of many societies. And just as they inherited the evil of their believing forebears with a vengeance (e.g., Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot who likely murdered more people than all of the people murdered throughout prior history, including Hitler's victims), so too did they inherit the notions of goodness and kindness.

In short, a good atheist is not good because he is an atheist. He is good in spite of his atheism. In stark contrast, a person who believes in G-d, and in inherent and absolute goodness does good because of his or her belief. When he commits a crime it is in spite of that belief.

A Mitzvah among Mitzvos

Of all the 613 Mitzvos (the plural of Mitzvah – some pronounce it, Mitzvot) the Mitzvah of Tefillin is singled out as a unique Mitzvah. Tefillin serve as a paradigm for all the Mitzvos and is even characterized as the most significant of all the Mitzvos. The sources for the above will be cited in Chapter One. In subsequent chapters we will, with G-d's help, attempt to explain why Jewish tradition accords this Mitzvah so much prominence. Many will wonder how Tefillin makes someone a better person. We will, with G-d's help, attempt to shed some light on this subject.

Multiple Layers

As we reflect on the significance of a Mitzvah and how it impacts our lives, we will see how each and every Mitzvah has many layers of meaning and effects.

First and foremost, as will be explained in depth in Chapter Two, a Mitzvah is a commandment that we perform primarily because it is a commandment. However, in addition to the basic understanding of a Mitzvah as G-d's command, each Mitzvah serves multiple purposes. Upon deeper reflection, each Mitzvah has multiple dimensions, many of which are most pronounced with the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

Before beginning our discussion about the specific dimensions of a Mitzvah, one important insight is in order here that will allay the confusion some have with the general concept of a Mitzvah.

To understand what a Mitzvah is, it is helpful to know what it is not.

The following humorous, but sad, story clearly illustrates my point.

The Mitzvah Train…

A very wealthy Jew threw a huge party for all of his guests, serving lavish food. When the party was over he noticed his wife collecting the left-overs and getting ready to dump them in the garbage. He was horrified. "How can you throw out good food? It's a terrible sin! One may never waste food. It is Bal Tashchis!"

His wife replied, "But the food is no longer fresh. It is not healthy to eat such food."

"The food is still good. Let us do a Mitzvah and feed it to the poor Jew, Yankel, who lives down the street."

The rich man's wife had no alternative, and with a heavy heart she delivered the food to Yankel.

The next day, the hapless wife reported to her "benevolent" husband that Yankel had taken ill from food poisoning.

"Wow, now I have the opportunity to visit Yankel and fulfill the Mitzvah of Bikur Cholim, visiting the sick," he squealed with excitement.

On the next day, the wife reported the tragic news that Yankel had died. The husband's response was again positive. "The poor widow and orphans are penniless. I will pay for all the funeral expenses. There is no greater Mitzvah than helping the poor to bury their loved ones. It is Chesed shel Emes, a true act of kindness."

To make a long story short, he paid for the funeral, personally attended the funeral and helped to bury the dead, fulfilled the Mitzvah of comforting the mourners, and, last but not least, left a hefty amount of money for the poor widow and orphans to fulfill the Mitzvah of supporting those unfortunate souls.

At the end of this saga, the rich man turned to his wife and said, “My dear wife, imagine if I would have allowed you to throw out the food, I would have violated the Mitzvah of Bal Tashchis, missed the mitzvah of feeding the poor, visiting the sick, burying the dead, comforting the mourners and supporting a widow and orphans with Tzedakah…”

This caricature of the terribly misguided “Mitzvah man” is reflected in the way some perform a Mitzvah as if it revolves around them.

A Mitzvah is first and foremost about G-d. While we greatly benefit from it, it should not revolve around us. A Mitzvah is our way of saying to G-d “we are here for You.

A Mitzvah is about a relationship with G-d. Indeed, the giving of the Torah and its commandments on Mount Sinai has been likened to a marriage.

A good marriage is one in which everything we do revolves around the significant other. It’s not, “I give 50% and you give 50%,” but we each give 100% of ourselves to the other.

An Illustration of this point, although, it should be self-evident, is the way we give gifts to someone with whom we have a relationship. There are two possible scenarios that reflect the difference between a real expression of love and devotion and one that is self-serving.

Take the case of the wife who wants to have a warm, private, homemade dinner in a cozy and romantic atmosphere to celebrate her birthday or wedding anniversary. Her husband is either oblivious to her preference or thinks he can outdo it. He makes reservations in an expensive restaurant, invites friends, etc.

In the husband’s mind he is going all out to make the evening the most meaningful one for his wife. He’s spending tons of money and doing it on the highest level. The problem is that while he is thinking of what to do for his wife, he is not thinking about what she would want. Even though he is ostensibly doing something for her, he ends up being the focal point of the gift.

The true gift that expresses a genuine and ideal marriage is when what we do for our spouse is about them, not about us.

The most important thought that we should have while doing a Mitzvah is that it is about G-d and not about me. This does not mean that there is nothing in the Mitzvah for us. On the contrary, as in a good marriage, the more it is about the other, the more we get out of marriage for ourselves.

As we will see, the Tefillin that we wear highlight idea — that it is about G-d and not about us — in ways that are more pronounced than in other Mitzvos.

CHAPTER TWO: THE KING'S CROWN

Fundamental Mitzvos

It is axiomatic in Judaism that one should not "weigh the value of a Mitzvah" but treat them all equally . Nevertheless, our Sages did emphasize the central and fundamental nature of specific Mitzvos.

In the realm of the Mitzvos that govern our relationships with others ("Bein adam lachaveiro-Between man and man") we find the Mitzvah of "love your fellow as yourself" singled out as the essence of the entire Torah. The Mitzvah of Tzedakah is likewise singled out as carrying weight equal to all the other Mitzvos.

Within the commandments that deal with our relationship with G-d, referred to as "Bein adam lamakom-Between man and the Omnipresent [G-d]" there are also certain Mitzvos that stand out. To cite a few examples: One can find discussion in the Talmud about the centrality of circumcision, Torah study, Shabbos observance, Tzitzis, remembering the Exodus, faith in G-d, love and fear of (or reverence for) G-d, prayer, and others.

Uniqueness of Tefillin

However, the Jerusalem Talmud expresses the centrality of Tefillin in the most dramatic way:

"There is no Mitzvah—of the positive Mitzvos in the Torah—that is greater than the Mitzvah of Tefillin, for the entire Torah has been equated with Tefillin, as it is stated: "[And it shall be a sign for you on

your arm and a remembrance between your eyes] so that G-d's Torah shall be in your mouth."

The equation of Tefillin to all of the Mitzvos is also mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, albeit, in a legal context: "The entire Torah is equated with Tefillin." And, although it says "Torah" it is understood to mean the Mitzvos of the Torah.

What is it in this equation that makes Tefillin even more central than other Mitzvos that are also regarded as being equal to the entire Torah?

The precise terminology employed by the Talmud with regard to the centrality of other Mitzvos is generally that a certain Mitzvah "weighs" like all the Mitzvos. With respect to Tefillin the Talmud uses the term "equated."

What is the difference between these two expressions?

The Rebbe explains that the equation of Tefillin to all the Mitzvos is not just a conceptual and theoretical equation. It is one that has practical application to many of the Mitzvos.

Tefillin: The Paradigm of All the Mitzvos

The import of the Rebbe's analysis is that Tefillin are unique, in that they are the paradigm for other Mitzvos. It does not simply mean to suggest that the reward for this Mitzvah is equal to all the other Mitzvos. Nor does it just possess some underlying philosophy and symbolism that animates the observance of other Mitzvos.

For example, faith is the basis for all other Mitzvos, but it does not tell us anything about the manner in which we should observe them. Love of one's fellow will encourage a person to be charitable and to give lovingly. However, it does not define what the Mitzvah is or its objectives.

Tefillin, by contrast, are not just a practice that could energize the other Mitzvos. Tefillin actually inform us about the way in which other Mitzvos are to be performed. The practice of laying Tefillin opens up for us an entire philosophy of Mitzvos.

In other words, Tefillin are not just a fundamental Mitzvah and the soul of other Mitzvos; they also highlight the most salient features of all the Mitzvos.

To further demonstrate how Tefillin encapsulate the conceptual basis of all Mitzvos, we can point to the designation of the Shel Rosh-the

head Tefillin as a crown that is worn above the head. Moreover, it is not only our crown; it is also G-d's "crown," as it were.

In truth, according to the Talmud, all of the commandments are referred to as G-d's crown. The fact that Tefillin are singled out as a crown—and physically resemble one—indicates that it is the representative symbol of all the commandments.

Employing the terminology of the Haggadah we are entitled to ask:

Why is this Mitzvah different from all the other Mitzvos?

Pre-Dated Sinai

The commandment of Tefillin was given some time before the Jews received the Torah at Sinai. When the Jews were in Egypt, prior to the Exodus, G-d commanded them concerning the Mitzvah of Tefillin. In fact, the commandment to put on Tefillin then is mentioned twice.

There is yet another interesting fact about the origin of Tefillin. According to the Talmud, the Patriarchs anticipated the commandments of the Torah and observed them in one form or another. However, nowhere do we find any explicit mention of them observing any of these commandments, with one notable exception—the Mitzvah of Tefillin!

According to the Zohar, Jacob fulfilled the Mitzvah of Tefillin with the rods that he used to produce streaked animals:

"Jacob took himself fresh sticks of poplar, hazel and chestnut, and he peeled white streaks on them by uncovering the white that was (inside) the sticks. He inserted the sticks that he had peeled, into the pools (into which) the watering troughs (would fill) where the flocks would come to drink, so that they faced the animals."

Upon seeing these rods, the animals would become stimulated, mate and bear ringed, patched and striped offspring.

According to the Zohar, this entire exercise, which seems on the surface to have been Jacob's way of outsmarting his devious father-in-law Laban, was actually also a spiritual exercise in which Jacob simulated the ritual of Tefillin. The same spiritual energy that is generated with Tefillin, he achieved with those staffs.

The fact that Tefillin—in one form or another—predated Sinai, also points to Tefillin as the ultimate model for all the commandments.

However, we must understand why Tefillin were chosen to be the model for other Mitzvos.

In the following chapters, we will attempt to show that Tefillin possess the salient qualities associated with Mitzvos in ways that no other Mitzvah does. It therefore is the ultimate paradigmatic Mitzvah.

CHAPTER THREE: TEFILLIN: THE ESSENCE OF A MITZVAH

Most Important Reason for Doing a Mitzvah

As mentioned in the introduction, the simple translation of the word Mitzvah is “commandment,” not good deed. And, of all the commandments of the Torah, Tefillin arguably capture the essence of what a commandment is, more so than any other Mitzvah.

To explain, we must first elaborate on the true meaning of a Mitzvah/commandment.

Notwithstanding the many layers and dimensions of a Mitzvah, the most important reason for doing a Mitzvah is that it is G-d’s will.

From this vantage point, there is no need for us to explain the significance of a Mitzvah, or to point to the beauty and meaningfulness possessed by each and every Mitzvah (to be explored and elaborated on in subsequent chapters) when we can do the Mitzvah simply because it is G-d’s will. In Torah parlance, especially in Chassidic literature, this attitude is known simply as “Kabbolas ol- Accepting the yoke.”

Chop Wood!

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the author of the Chassidic classic, Tanya, known as the Alter Rebbe) states: “If G-d would have commanded us to chop wood we would have performed it the same.” In other words, even if G-d would tell us to do things that have absolutely no utilitarian value—neither physical nor spiritual—we would still do them precisely as we were commanded because there is nothing greater than simply fulfilling His will.

The fact that Mitzvos are aesthetically beautiful, laden with meaning and that they bring about positive changes in us and in the world, is

an embellishment to the ultimate and basic reason for the Mitzvos—doing it because it is His will.

Divine Will versus Human Will

The reason why this is considered the ultimate way of performing a Mitzvah can be understood in light of how we view G-d's will and how it is contrasted with human will.

When a person expresses his or her will for something to be done, there must always be a reason why. "Where there is a will there is a way" is a popular adage that defines will as a "way." It is the way to attain a certain goal. Will is not here just for the sake of will.

Of course, there are people who are totally irrational and stubborn, who can give no good reason for their desires. That does not alter the fact that no one will respect that desire, precisely because it leads nowhere. Moreover, it is not in the best interests of a capricious individual to have his or her irrational desire satisfied. One's will is only a valid expression of one's self when it leads to a positive end that is outside of the self. Where will has no purpose it has no intrinsic value.

If a parent, for example, demands of its child to bring disgrace on him or her, the child may not oblige, because it is considered to be an abuse of the parent rather than showing devotion to their will.

A Means or an End

Thus, when we speak of a person's will it is always a stepping stone for something higher. If I want a house, the house is my goal, not the expression of my will. Will is merely a means to an end.

G-d's will, by contrast, is not here for anything outside of itself. His will is not here to serve an outside purpose or goal. Just as G-d is not here as an accessory to anything else, He is not a means to an end—He is the "end." And because G-d and His will are one, His will is likewise not a means to an end. It is the end.

Chukim

The above definition of a Mitzvah-commandment is true about all of the 613 commandments. Yet, the commandments have been divided into three categories: Eidos, Chukim and Mishpatim. They are best translated as "testimonial or symbolic commandments such as Shabbos and Jewish Holidays; supra-rational mitzvos which are not self-evident and for which no reasons are given, such as the prohibition against wearing a garment made of wool and linen; and

commandments that are rational — had they not been commanded, we would have figured them out by ourselves.

Now, while as Jews we must observe all the 613 Mitzvos primarily because G-d commanded us to do them, the Eidos and Mishpatim were intended, as well, to teach us lessons to edify, refine and elevate us.

The idea that we do them for no other reason than fulfilling G-d's will is most pronounced in Chukim, the trans-rational commandments. They were given expressly for this purpose to test our obedience to G-d's will even when we do not have any rational or emotional reason to fall back on.

The attitude necessary for observance of the Chukim is referred to in Chassidic literature as kabbolas ol. Translated literally, it means "accepting the yoke." Just as an animal is yoked to keep it in line to perform its labor, so too, the human being must accept the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom.

However, when a Jew observes the Chukim, there is no overt manifestation of kabbolas ol. For example, if one refuses to wear a garment made of a mixture of wool and linen (one of the Chukim) an onlooker would be hard-pressed to know. There is no outward indication that a person has just surrendered his will, ignored logic and suppressed his feelings to do a Mitzvah. To discover the kabbolas ol mindset of that individual one would have to probe deeper into the Mitzvah to discover that it is a trans-rational one.

Moreover, unless we can read the person's mind or ask about his or her motives, we cannot divine why the person is doing the Mitzvah. For all we know, that individual may have been impelled to do the Mitzvah for some rationally considered spiritual benefit.

Tefillin: Surrender to G-d's Will

Tefillin, however, stand out. The very structure of the Mitzvah evinces the idea that we must first and foremost accept the Mitzvah for what it is — essentially, G-d's will. This is true despite the fact that Tefillin are generally included in the category of Eidos—testimonial and symbolic commandments.

By donning the Tefillin-shel yad-Hand Tefillin before the shel-rosh-Head Tefillin we give expression to the fundamental state of mind that must accompany every Mitzvah.

The hand and the head represent action and understanding, respectively. We place the Tefillin on our arm and hand first in

accordance with the Torah's command: "And you shall tie them for a sign on your hand and an ornament between your eyes." The Torah makes it very clear, first the hand Tefillin and then the head Tefillin.

What does this order signify?

Chassidic thought explains that the order of laying Tefillin is instructive of what comes first in our commitment to perform a Mitzvah. The act of the Mitzvah comes first. After we commit ourselves to the action we may follow it up with an attempt to understand the "why"; to delve into the inner meaning of the Mitzvah.

This is said to parallel the response the Jewish nation conveyed when they were asked about their desire to accept the Torah: Their response was: "Na'aseh v'nishma-We will do it and we will hear." First they expressed their willingness to abide by these commands even before they heard what they entailed.

This attitude, the Talmud tells us , earned them a reward: two crowns were placed on their heads: one for saying we will do it, and one for saying we will hear it. The implication of the Talmud's statement is that if they had not agreed to "do" first they would not have earned these crowns.

At any rate, we see how, Jewish history's most defining event, Sinai — the source of all that is Jewish—demanded an approach that transcended reason and all the profundities that are to be found in the performance of every Mitzvah.

This approach of Na'aseh before Nishma is practiced every time we put on the hand Tefillin before the head Tefillin. There is arguably no other Mitzvah in which the very physical process of the Mitzvah—i.e., the manner in which it is performed—demonstrates the essence of what is fundamental to a Mitzvah: conforming to G-d's will.

A Mitzvah is a Crown: Tefillin the Ultimate Crown

In the preceding chapter, reference was made to the fact that the Tefillin are called a crown. In addition, the Talmud refers to each and every Mitzvah as G-d's crown.

What is the connection between a crown and a Mitzvah?

Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the Alter Rebbe, in his classic work Tanya, explains that a Mitzvah is an expression of G-d's will. "Will," by definition, transcends one's logic and power of reason. When G-d revealed His teachings of Torah, He revealed His Divine attribute of wisdom. When He commanded us to perform the Mitzvos, He revealed

His will that transcends reason. A crown is thus a fitting metaphor for the Mitzvah because it is placed on and above the head.

While every Mitzvah is part of G-d's crown, the Mitzvah of Tefillin is unique in that it singularly expresses the notion of transcending reason and prefacing action to understanding.

We can now appreciate the abovementioned reward the Jews received for accepting the Torah unconditionally: Two crowns.

If a crown is a symbol of transcending reason, the Jewish people, by prefacing we will do before we will hear, demonstrated their connection to the "crown" of Torah, not just its inner content and logic.

Reenactment of Acceptance of Torah

In effect, when we put on the Tefillin in its prescribed order, we thereby reenact the way the Jewish people accepted the Torah at Sinai. We demonstrate our receptivity to the Torah and its commands and are worthy of wearing the crown of Tefillin.

There is yet one more area that expresses the Tefillin's beyond logic approach. The objective of Tefillin—which one must think about when he puts on the Tefillin—is that he is subordinating and subjugating his heart and mind to G-d. How can one subordinate one's mind? Only by transcending them can he subordinate his understanding and feelings.

Thus, the physical act of putting on the shel yad before the shel rosh, as well as the idea of subordinating heart and mind (the thought which accompanies the putting on of Tefillin), point to the idea that Tefillin transcend the limited devotion to G-d.

CHAPTER FOUR: EMULATING G-D/IMMITATIO DEI

The Ultimate Art-form

One of the Torah's commandments is to go in G-d's ways. G-d's identity is obviously inscrutable and beyond any description. Yet we know G-d by virtue of what he does. The Torah is replete with actions that are taken by G-d that we can emulate in our own humble way.

The Talmud states: Just as He is compassionate, so too you shall be compassionate.

It has been stated that the ultimate art-form is the performance of a Mitzvah because all other art-forms are imitations of nature, which is, in and of itself, an imitation. Nature is a mere glimmer of G-d's power. Everything that exists down here has its parallel in higher spiritual worlds. Art is, thus, imitating an imitation.

The ultimate art-form is imitation of that which is real. When we do a Mitzvah we are in effect emulating G-d.

That every Mitzvah is an imitation of G-d's actions is rooted in the Midrashic interpretation of the verse in Psalms: "He tells His words to Jacob, His statutes and judgments to Israel." Says the Midrash: "His words, statutes and judgments that He Himself does He commands Israel to do." Thus, the emphasis of the verse: "His words… His statutes… His judgments." First G-d performs the Mitzvah, and then He tells us to emulate Him.

By emulating G-d's actions we too become G-dly.

Now, although this concept of imitatio dei is true with regard to every Mitzvah, it is especially pronounced with those commandments that are rational and social. The Talmud explicitly applies the verse "to go in His ways" to acts of kindness and compassion.

The Midrash takes it a step further and applies it to Chukim as well. However, the Midrash does not single out any specific Mitzvah that G-d performs.

G-d puts on Tefillin

However, we do find a specific reference to one Mitzvah: The Talmud speaks of how G-d puts on Tefillin. According to the teachings of Chassidus, it is G-d's putting on Tefillin that enables us to do the same.

There are two ways to initiate a relationship between G-d and mankind. The first occurs when G-d initiates the process by arousing us. This is referred to in the Zohar as isarusa d'le'eila—an arousal from above. We must seize upon every one of these opportunities to take advantage of this unexpected surge of inspiration. We must respond with what the Zohar calls isarusa d'lesata—an arousal from below.

The second occurs when we imitate the relationship with an isarusa d'lesata. G-d then reciprocates with His isarusa d'le'eila.

When G-d “wears” Tefillin it is the inspiration from above that energizes us and gives us the power to put on our Tefillin; i.e., reciprocate our love and devotion for Him.

And while, as stated, this is true for every Mitzvah—G-d imitates and we follow suit—it is especially poignant for the Mitzvah of Tefillin, because there is no other Mitzvah in which G-d’s performance is as dramatic an expression of G-d’s love and admiration for us as Tefillin.

What is it about Tefillin that is so expressive of G-d’s love?

G-d’s Love and Admiration for Israel

By delving into the nature of G-d’s Tefillin, the mechanism for it to empower us to put on Tefillin becomes clear.

G-d’s Tefillin, the Talmud states contain the Biblical verses that extol the uniqueness of the Jewish people. “Who is like Israel, one nation on earth” is one of the four verses contained in G-d’s Tefillin.

When a person hears of the love G-d has for us, it generates a reciprocal love for Him that we express by wearing our Tefillin.

In other words, our Mitzvah of wearing Tefillin is a response to G-d putting on Tefillin and the love for us that it represents.

Eminently Logical

From this vantage point, putting on Tefillin is an eminently logical act. It is as logical as saying thank you to someone who just liberated you from slavery. Indeed, one of the central themes of the Tefillin is the Exodus from Egypt, where G-d “carried us on the wings of eagles,” performed great miracles and chose us from all nations of the earth for a special mission and a special relationship.

So, notwithstanding the fact that Tefillin are neither a Chok—trans-rational law nor a Mishpat—rational law, but rather belong under the rubric of Eidos—testimonies. Tefillin does indeed also contain elements of the other two categories.

As mentioned above, placing of the hand Tefillin before the head Tefillin, exemplifies the need to “surrender” ourselves to G-d’s will. This is a salient characteristic of the category of Chukim, whereas the idea of reciprocating love fits into the very rational domain of Mishpatim.

CHAPTER FIVE: RECIPROCATION

We Count!

In the preceding chapter we explained the concept of how our Mitzvos are ways in which we emulate G-d. This was based on the premise that G-d initiated all of the Mitzvos and performs them before, and as a basis, for the commandments He asks us to observe. In this model, G-d is the initiator and we are the ones who respond and reciprocate.

Chassidic thought takes the idea of reciprocation a step further. When we perform a Mitzvah it causes G-d to do the same Mitzvah. Indeed, the Mitzvah that G-d "performs" as a result of our observance is more potent and sublime than the Mitzvah He performs as a precursor to our Mitzvos.

As we mentioned in the preceding chapter, G-d's relationship with us via the Mitzvos is a two-directional one: There are the Mitzvos and the inspiration that they conduct which G-d initiates—isarusa d'le'eila and there are initiatives that we take called isarusa d'lesata.

When the process is begun by us, by not waiting until we are inspired, the effects are more sublime.

This revolutionary concept that our initiatives are more powerful than G-d's unilateral initiatives is based on the premise that our actions count and they count significantly. Not only do they make a difference for us in our own lives, they impact the entire world. Even G-d is "affected" by our actions, and responds with greater force than if He had initiated the relationship.

Of course, we must add the caveat that G-d is not affected by anything. When we say that He is affected by our actions this means that He chooses to be affected.

This idea can be traced to the Biblical statement in Job: "If you have sinned what have you done against Him. And if your transgressions be multiplied, what have you done to Him? If you are righteous, what have you given Him? Or what has He received from your hand?" Yet the Torah makes it clear that when we offer a sacrifice it causes G-d great pleasure. How do we reconcile these two Biblical truths?

The answer is that G-d's Essence is not affected by anything unless He chooses that it will be affected. This is also the basis for the idea that there is free will even though G-d knows everything, because, as Maimonides writes, "G-d desires that we have free will." This means

that G-d desires our choices and efforts and allows Himself to be affected by them.

When a Jew gives tzedakah, G-d reciprocates and gives us Tzedakah. When we study Torah, G-d studies the very same Torah. When we suffer, G-d suffers; when we rejoice G-d rejoices.

What is Above Depends on Us Below

Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this concept can be found in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers): "Know what is above you…" The Maggid of Mezeritch and the Alter Rebbe are both quoted with a novel reinterpretation of the above: "Know that what is above is from you." This means that we determine the way things function above.

This notion that our actions impact G-d's actions is most pronounced with the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

Indeed, the same statement that speaks of how G-d puts on His Tefillin before He commands us to put on ours has been understood in Chassidic philosophy in reverse order as well. When we put Tefillin on our arm and head, this causes G-d to reciprocate and put on His Tefillin. And when He puts on Tefillin in response to our fulfillment of this Mitzvah, it is superior to His wearing Tefillin before we do the Mitzvah.

Application to Every Mitzvah

One could ask, why is this considered unique? Isn't this true with every Mitzvah? Doesn't our Tzedakah cause G-d to give His tzedakah?

The answer has been provided for in the famous Bar Mitzvah discourse, where the Rebbe Maharash expounds on this matter and states that when we put on Tefillin which extols the oneness of G-d, it causes G-d to put on His Tefillin which extols the uniqueness of the Jewish people.

Based on this analysis, putting on Tefillin, arguably, has a qualitative advantage over every other Mitzvah in this regard. Whereas every other Mitzvah generates a reciprocal Mitzvah from G-d, only the Mitzvah of Tefillin actually magnifies the virtue of the Jewish people. Tefillin thus change the entire dynamic of the relationship between G-d and Israel. Once we are placed under G-d's magnifying glass and he views us through that lens, we are then deserving of all the blessings that other Mitzvos generate individually.

If our virtue and importance is what G-d's Tefillin represent, then our "stocks" rise considerably when G-d puts on Tefillin in response to our fulfillment of the Mitzvah.

A Pattern

If we look at the three aspects of the Mitzvah of Tefillin explained thus far, we can detect a sequential pattern that parallels our own relationships.

The first aspect of the Mitzvah is simply doing it because it is G-d's will. This appears to be the lowest level in our relationship with G-d because it is based on fear. We are like servants who serve their Master without intention of receiving any reward. We're not expecting to get anything out of this observance.

The next level in the relationship is where G-d expresses His love for us by initiating the act of Tefillin that contain the greatness of Israel.

This is followed by the response G-d makes to our overtures and expressions of love for Him. And, as stated, the response G-d makes to our Tefillin by putting on His Tefillin is infinitely higher than the Tefillin G-d wears as a prelude to our Tefillin.

CHAPTER SIX: BONDING WITH G-D

Another Translation

The word Mitzvah actually has two translations that, at first glance, seem to be mutually exclusive. In addition to its simple and straightforward meaning, commandments, it also can be rendered "bond" or "connection." It is based on the Aramaic word tzavsa which means companionship.

When we perform a Mitzvah it creates a bond between us mortals and G-d.

Why is it so important to describe a Mitzvah as a bond?

Upon deeper reflection, we discover that the very concept of a bond or connection to G-d is revolutionary and counter-intuitive. A bond between two finite creatures is understandable because there is always a finite distance between them which must be spanned.

G-d, however, is infinite. There is no rational basis for the notion that a finite being can have any relationship with an Infinite being. It is far

more preposterous to suggest that type of union than it is to discuss a relationship between a person and an atom. Yet, the Mitzvah does precisely that. It creates a bridge between the Infinite G-d and the finite human being who performs the Mitzvah.

Indeed, it is the only way any human being can have a relationship with G-d. A Mitzvah is the only way our relationship with G-d is real and mutual.

Delusional?

Let's try to counter this premise with an argument from so many spiritual people who have a powerful relationship with G-d and have never even heard of a Mitzvah, let alone performed one. Are these people delusional or dishonest?

A partial answer is that many confuse G-d with spirituality. Just because G-d is not a physical being does not by default mean that He is a spiritual being. To characterize G-d as spiritual is no less an imposition of a finite definition on Him than is ascribing human or physical properties to Him .

This does not mean that spirituality and G-d do not share some affinity. While they are not synonymous, spirituality can be our way of expressing our acknowledgment and awareness of the existence of G-d.

A materialistic and hedonistic person is not likely to be turned on to G-d while engaging in the fulfillment of his or her unbridled physical needs and desires.

One who is spiritual will generally gravitate towards G-d. Where spirituality becomes delusional and misguided is when a person confuses the experience of an awareness of G-d and a yearning to connect to Him, with actually having a relationship with G-d.

It can be compared to a person who feels love for someone, but never did anything for that person and cannot understand why the other does not respond. Unrequited love is very often a product of feelings without genuine connections. How much more so is this true with an Infinite, inscrutable, elusive G-d.

So while uplifting feelings that accompany the spiritual individual are genuine, this does not mean that he or she has actually connected with G-d.

A simple analogy can be offered that can illustrate this point. A person may fall in love with the picture of another and get excited when they view the picture, but that does not mean that the person has entered

into a relationship with the other. It does mean that a relationship can develop because there is, at the very least, an awareness of the other and the qualities that the other possesses that are attractive.

Let's take the analogy further. One views a video of another and is enamored with him or her, but is satisfied with just viewing the video.

Another scenario: After viewing the video, the viewer who has fallen in love with that person discovers that no such person even exists, it was just a sophisticated technological fabrication of a person.

Well, the same is true of a person who is content with spiritual awareness of G-d and a desire to connect with Him. G-d, for all intents and purposes, is beyond having a relationship just as one cannot have a relationship with one that doesn't really exist. G-d does not exist in the conventional sense of the word, although He is obviously the ultimate existence

Bridging the Gap

Yet, G-d declares that we can bond with Him. How?

By way of the Mitzvah, G-d performs the impossible and allows a finite being to connect with the infinite G-d.

If G-d's infinite nature would preclude Him from having a relationship with us, that too would be an imposition on G-d's power. G-d transcends finitude and transcends the constraints of being infinite. And the means to channel the infinite into the finite is the Mitzvah.

There is an analogy cited in Chassidic literature that gives us some insight into how a Mitzvah can create a bond between the infinite G-d and the finite human being.

A professor engaged in a deep area of knowledge has nothing in common with a simple, illiterate custodian. But then when the professor is engaged in an important experiment and gets thirsty, he asks the custodian to bring him water, a connection is forged.

Similarly, when G-d asks us to do something for Him, that, itself, creates a connection between G-d and us. Even before we fulfill the Mitzvah, the very fact that He has commanded us to perform the Mitzvah suggests that He has decided to connect with us. The connection is solidified when we actually perform the Mitzvah.

Special Bond Through Chukim

Although the bond created through the Mitzvah is true for every one of the 613 commandments, this concept is most pronounced with Chukim, the trans-rational commandments.

When a Mitzvah is rational, we don't sense the fact that the greatest aspect of the Mitzvah is not its rational or emotional appeal to us, but the fact that it is a Mitzvah.

If we focus on the rational, emotional and spiritual aspects of the Mitzvah, we will definitely feel the excitement, but it cannot compare to the realization that the very act of the Mitzvah itself creates a bond between us and G-d.

Intertwined

We can now see how the two translations of the word Mitzvah are intertwined. The reason a Mitzvah creates a connection (the second translation) is precisely because it is G-d's commandment (the first translation). If a Mitzvah were merely a good deed and not commanded by G-d, it would not create that bond.

Unique Bond Through Tefillin

What does all of the above have to do with Tefillin? Tefillin are included in the category of eidos-testimonial commandments that appeal to our emotions and spiritual nature. How can we claim that the concept of bonding is more pronounced with the Mitzvah of Tefillin?

The answer is that Tefillin exemplify the idea of connection on two levels:

First, the very word Tefillin is related to the word Tofel that means to bind. No other Mitzvah has the idea of binding in its title.

Second, the very mechanics of Tefillin involve tying the Tefillin (with knots) onto our bodies. There is no other Mitzvah that involves, literally, tying ourselves to an object. While we hold the Lulav in our hands, and enwrap ourselves in the Tallis, we do not bind ourselves to these Mitzvah objects the way we do with Tefillin.

Moreover, the object that we tie on to our bodies contains the section of the Torah that declares G-d's absolute unity. Hence, we are connecting ourselves to the oneness of G-d, in a manner unparalleled among all other Mitzvos.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DIVINE DISCIPLINE

Animals Don't Try to Copy Humans

Let's get "back down to earth" and discuss Tefillin from a very basic vantage point: The role of a Mitzvah as a form of discipline.

What distinguishes humans from animals is that while animals do not try to copy humans, humans try to copy animals.

The Torah declares: "When a wild donkey's colt is born a man." A child left to his or her own devices will grow up without any purpose, structure or order to life. Without intervention, humans are likened to the most undisciplined of animals.

In truth, animals do have instinctive forms of structure. Humans do not even have that without proper parenting and mentoring.

Humans need structure and discipline just to maintain their status as lowly animals. But a human being is required to be more than just an animal. A human being must be able to transcend his or her nature, something an animal cannot do. And for this, discipline is crucial.

According to our tradition, a child is born with a full complement of animal needs and desires. The Animal Soul fully enters the body of the child at birth and gets stronger by the day. Physical maturity does not necessarily go together with moral maturity. On the contrary, the more the child matures and has the means to understand how to get what it wants, the more it will do to get its way. Moreover, the more a person is engaged in satisfying one's physical needs and desires, the more the Animal Soul is invigorated.

The G-dly soul, though it begins its entry into the child at the time of the Bris (for a boy and at birth or baby naming for a girl), does not fully manifest itself in the person until Bar or Bas Mitzvah. As such, the Animal Soul has seniority and we must work that much harder to overcome its lack of discipline.

Exercises for Good Spiritual Health

One way of viewing the role of a Mitzvah is to view it as G-d's exercises intended to teach us discipline.

When we know that at a given time each day we have to recite certain prayers, stand, sit, wear certain garments, work, desist from work, etc., it enables us to become disciplined and better people.

And just as we now know that physical exercise is crucial for good physical health, the same should be understood to be true with respect to spiritual health. The Mitzvos, especially the repetitive ones, are the route to good spiritual health.

An army that lacks discipline is guaranteed to lose its battles. And just as we cannot defend our country from invasion if the soldiers and defenders are an unruly and undisciplined mob, so too, we as humans cannot defend ourselves from the intrusion of negative influences if we are not properly trained and disciplined.

Life is like a battlefield. In Hebrew the word for bread—the symbol of all material needs—shares the same root as the word for war.

To survive as moral creatures we must not only preach the importance of not stealing, lying etc., there is a need for a lifestyle that informs every part of our thought, speech and action. Every moment of the day has to be regimented to fortify us with the moral strength that derives from discipline to overcome the temptation to succumb to the immense pressures that come from without and from within.

Double-Edged Sword

However, discipline can be a double-edged sword. While it is helpful in conditioning a person to grow morally, it can also have the opposite effect. The disciplined individual can feel that he or she is in a strait-jacket and rebel. The average person cannot readily see the moral value in doing 50 push-ups, for example.

The person disciplined can also chafe under the yoke of the one who is doing the disciplining, resenting the fact that someone else is telling him what he can or cannot do. Humans crave their freedom and resent being dictated to by others.

Thirdly, discipline is ineffective if there is too much or too little of it.

A fourth drawback is that in order for discipline to work, you must be forced to act against the desires of your own ego and accept authority. Hence, if we try to discipline ourselves by doing things that appeal to our mind and heart, it does not challenge the wishes of our egos. Conversely, if it doesn’t appeal to our understanding and emotions, and feels like discipline for the sake of discipline, then we

are likely to challenge the authority of the one who is doing the disciplining.

To complicate matters further, there is no one formula for the amount or nature of the discipline needed by each individual. Parents who have several children discover that their children are worlds apart in terms of what each needs and how they respond to discipline.

Mitzvah: The Perfect Discipline

And this is where the role of the Mitzvah as discipline enters into the picture.

Because it is G-d given, it enjoys all the benefits of discipline without any of the drawbacks.

First, while the Mitzvah places restrictions on us, it does so with the tenderness of a mother's caress. King Solomon alludes to the gentleness of the commandments of the Torah when he states: "Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace."

Moreover, Mitzvos, G-d's commandments, are designed to be balanced. Some are predominantly expressions of chesed-kindness, others are more reflective of gevurah-judgment. Following all the Mitzvos thus provides us with a perfect balance that makes it less likely that the one being disciplined will feel that he or she is suffocating and overwhelmed.

In addition, the realization that it is G-d and not another human who is imposing his will on us, makes the exercise of discipline that much more palatable. G-d knows us better than we know ourselves and cares for us more than we can imagine. Knowing this makes us less likely to resent being disciplined.

And thirdly, there is minimal danger of too much discipline or too little. The Torah has it measured and balanced so that one who follows the Torah will get the most balanced form of discipline, designed to meet the needs of every individual, no matter who they are.

Of course, there are times when Mitzvah discipline does not seem to work. That is because the person injects his or her own subjective spin and color to the Divine Mitzvah. Frequently, we compromise the way a Mitzvah is performed, undermining its efficacy much like a patient who does not follow doctor's orders and changes the dosage of medicine or the schedule for taking it.

Chukim: Enhanced Discipline

That Mitzvos are Divine discipline is true for every Mitzvah, but this is particularly expressed through the Mitzvos that are in the category of Chukim.

While every consistent act imposed on an individual by a higher authority tends to regiment that person and make him or her more receptive to following a moral path, the Chukim are best suited to accomplishing this goal. Precisely because the Chukim do not appeal to one's logic and emotions—they are performed only because G-d has so commanded—they have a greater capacity to encourage us to accept living in accordance with a Higher power.

When one is undisciplined, one is free to pursue every whim and desire. Discipline entails surrendering one's own desires and proclivities. But for discipline to have a lasting effect, we must know that we are surrendering our will to a Higher Authority, not just to someone who seeks to exercise his power over us.

Chukim are, therefore, the best suited to accomplish that goal because they do not appeal to our minds and hearts; they require surrendering ourselves, which tempers our ego. This entails surrendering ourselves to a Higher Authority. We cannot delude ourselves into thinking that we are performing a Chok-ritual because it makes sense or is pleasurable. Rather, it is entirely an act of surrender to a Higher will and, therefore, has the optimum power for disciplining us.

Tefillin: The Ideal Disciplining Mitzvah

When we reflect on Tefillin, we discover that, in one sense, it has an even greater capacity to be a disciplining force than the Chukim, on several counts:

The idea of Tefillin is to surrender our minds and hearts to G-d. As noted in the preceding chapter, this is not just an accompanying meditation; it is reflected in the very physical act of putting on the Tefillin. Tefillin are placed on the head and near the heart. In fact, they are bound to the person, indicating the idea of one's entire being —hands, heart and mind—is subservient to G-d, whose name is invoked dozens of times in the Tefillin.

There is no other Mitzvah in which the idea of discipline is so pronounced as in Tefillin. It is our way of demonstrating to ourselves and the outside world that we are G-d's subjects. While Chukim get us in the "groove" of doing things that we may not understand and serves as a means to an end—surrender of our being to G-d—Tefillin actually constitute the end goal of surrender to G-d as an integral part of the ritual.

Tefillin also enjoy another feature that enhances their disciplining power.

One of the problems with discipline is that the person cannot be disciplined half-way. If my mind is in the right place, but my heart is still in the wrong place, eventually the heart will overtake the mind. As long as there is some part of the person that is left out of the disciplining exercise the person will not enjoy optimum results from that exercise. It may be compared to the person who takes a diet drink together with an order of a fatty hamburger with deep fried chips…

Tefillin are arguably the only Mitzvah which coordinates all of our faculties towards one goal. The Tefillin harness the mind, heart and hands and unifies them in perfect harmony. The straps of the head Tefillin hang down as if to suggest that the influence of the mind reach down even to the lower and baser aspects of the person. Tefillin, thus, represent the ultimate discipline.

Tefillin at 13

We can now perhaps shed some light on why Bar Mitzvah—the age of responsibility for all the Mitzvos—is highlighted by the single Mitzvah of Tefillin.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the person's Animal Soul has seniority. The G-dly soul does not fully manifest itself in the body until the age of Bar Mitzvah.

To counter years of the Animal Soul's growth and to support the fledgling G-dly soul's entry onto the scene, the Mitzvah of Tefillin in particular is crucial. It is the ultimate disciplining exercise which can tackle even the strongest animal. Indeed, most of the materials from which Tefillin are made come from animals, thus symbolizing the power of Tefillin to discipline even the most senior of Animal Souls.

CHAPTER EIGHT: REFINEMENT

Taming and Refining the Animal Within

Closely connected to the idea of discipline is the idea of refinement.

The Talmud states: “Mitzvos were given only to refine the creatures.” This statement is prefaced by a rather enigmatic statement: “Does G-d care if you slaughter an animal from the neck or from the nape of the neck?”

In other words, the Mitzvah need not serve any other purpose other than refinement.

What do our Sages mean when they speak of refinement?

On its most basic level, the human being possesses two souls; a G-dly soul and an animal soul. In truth, as was mentioned in the preceding chapter, the Animal Soul precedes the G-dly Soul by thirteen years. Only after Bar Mitzvah (and Bas Mitzvah of a girl at the age of twelve) do we have the full structure of our G-dly Soul intact and functioning. The Animal Soul is interested in one thing: satisfying its needs and wants. In a child, these needs and desires trump the needs and desires of the G-dly Soul and, often, what is satisfying to them is not in their best interest.

Depending on the nature of the Animal Soul—which differs from person to person—the individual’s character will be uncouth, unrefined and sometimes outright reprehensible.

Educating the child to do a Mitzvah even before they are technically obligated to do it helps to refine the child and to take the edge off his or her Animal Soul’s character.

In other words, the child is born with animal characteristics which are totally selfish and self-centered. To transform one’s character into a selfless and giving person is an act of refinement. The Mitzvah is the medium through which we bring about this refinement.

How does it work?

First, the Mitzvah is a divinely ordained action endowed with Divine power. Every time we perform a Mitzvah—whether we feel it or not—it removes some of the obstructive animal traits and makes us more human/G-dly. It also has a direct influence on our bodies; they too become more refined.

As an aside, when people make mistakes, they excuse it with the statement “I’m human.” The truth is that the mistakes come from our Animal Soul. The human part of us is the part that is informed and influenced by our G-dly Soul. One of the words for human being is Adam, the first human. This word is Biblically related to the word adamah, earth. Yet, it is also said to be related to the word adameh, in the verse “adameh l’elyon, I am like the One Above”.

Second, we all possess a Divine Soul, which, when activated, allows us to tame the animal within. The Mitzvah strengthens the G-dly Soul, which in turn, makes the Animal Soul more tame. And when the G-dly Soul is allowed to shine, it also illuminates the body and makes it more refined.

Third, the Animal Soul obstructs the view of the G-dly Soul. The Mitzvah is the mechanism that helps to remove the obstruction of the Animal Soul.

The More Mitzvos the Merrier

The idea of a Mitzvah as a source of refinement is alluded to in the Mishnah: "Rabbi Chananya ben Akashya says, 'The Holy One Blessed is He, wished to bestow merit upon the people of Israel, and He therefore gave them an abundance of Torah and Mitzvos, as it is stated , 'G-d desired, for the sake of its (Israel's) righteousness, to make the Torah great and glorious.'"

On the surface, the Mishnah seems to be saying that the more Mitzvos we have the better it is for us. Commentators have noted that taking on more Mitzvos can also prove to be a problem because it brings more opportunities to violate them. It's much easier to keep a few Mitzvos than a multitude of them.

The Maggid of Mezeritch provides a novel interpretation of this Mishnah. The Hebrew word that is generally translated as merit can also be translated as refinement. G-d wanted to the Jewish people to be able to be refined so He multiplied the number of Mitzvos.

In other words, the reason why we were given so many Mitzvos was to provide us with the opportunity to refine ourselves. The more Mitzvos we perform, the more refined we can become.

Chassidic sources explain that the 613 Mitzvos correspond to the 248 limbs and 365 sinews. Each Mitzvah has the capacity to refine one part of our physical being.

The Unique Role of Eidos and Mishpatim and Tefillin

This aspect of the Mitzvah applies to all the 613 Mitzvos, but it is especially pronounced with the category of Eidos, testimonies and Mishpatim, the rational commandments. These Mitzvos resonate with us because they are either logical or they are inspirational. They make us more sensitive to others and more desirous of having a relationship with G-d.

Upon deeper reflection, there is no Mitzvah in which the person is refined as much as the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

That Tefillin possess a unique refining quality is spelled out explicitly by Rambam in the context of the laws of Tefillin:

“The holiness of Tefillin is a high degree of sanctity. As long as Tefillin are on a person’s head and arm, he is humble and G-d fearing, is not drawn into frivolity and idle talk, does not dwell on evil thoughts but occupies his mind with thoughts of truth and righteousness. A man should, therefore, endeavor to wear Tefillin the entire day…”

Another source that points to the refining effects of the Tefillin can be found in the laws of oaths. When the court had to administer an oath, the person would hold a Torah scroll to ensure that they would not be swearing falsely. In the absence of a Torah scroll Tefillin were used.

This suggests that even holding Tefillin will instill the reverence for G-d that would prevent him or her from lying under oath.

Tefillin have an incredible capacity to transform a person in part because it is the only Mitzvah that is bound to the person. Second, it contains the name of G-d multiple times. Third, it entails subjugating our mind, heart and actions to G-d.

CHAPTER NINE: LIBERATING EXPERIENCE

Personal Liberation

A Mitzvah is also a liberating force. When discussing liberation, we have to divide it into two forms: personal and universal. As we shall see, Tefillin enjoy a special relationship with both forms of liberation.

Let’s begin discussing personal liberation. A person is a composite of body and soul. One without the other is not a viable human being. A body without a soul is a corpse and a soul without a body is a being that cannot relate to the physical world and, therefore, cannot accomplish anything in this world.

In the Talmud, the body and the soul are described as partners. When G-d holds us accountable for our actions, the soul and body each claim innocence. Despite this division, G-d judges us as a single entity. The Talmud provides a parable of a king who hired both a blind man and a crippled man to guard his orchard. The blind man carried the cripple

on his shoulders and together they stole the king's grapes. When each claimed that he could not possibly have committed this crime, the king had the blind man carry the cripple on his shoulders and punished them jointly.

If the body and soul were to express themselves as equal partners in shouldering their responsibilities, we would have an ideal world.

The reality is that the body conceals the understanding and feelings of the soul. The concealment is so absolute that a person can even be oblivious to the very existence of a soul. The body can even do things that are anathema to the soul.

This state of being is what we mean when we say that the soul is in captivity.

What about the Tzadik, the completely righteous individual?

Tanya states that even a Tzadik does not experience the same degree of passion for G-d as his soul had before it entered into his body. This means that even the soul of a Tzadik is stifled by its involvement with the body and its interaction with the physical world.

The soul in these situations is in a state of confinement. And it wants nothing but to return "home."

There is a beautiful parable that illustrates the point. A princess fell in love and eloped with a peasant who worked very hard to please her. After the initial ardor and excitement of the marriage wore off the peasant noticed that his wife, the princess, was depressed. She remembered the glitter and glamour of royal life, the music, art and pageantry. And now, all she had was a boor for a husband. She missed the life a princess.

The peasant husband, however, was convinced that she was feeling down because she didn't get enough vegetables...

The analogy is clear: The soul is the princess and is married to the boorish body. The soul yearns to go back. As long as it cannot experience the same blissful feeling it had in Paradise it feels like a prisoner.

This is why people climb mountains or search for treasures, explore outer space or deep sea diving. It is the soul stirring in them, urging them on to reach somewhere beyond themselves.

When my grandson was less than three years old, his mother took him shopping at Bed, Bath and Beyond. At the checkout counter he

remarked to his mother: “I see the beds and the baths, but where is the beyond?...

The Path to Personal Freedom

How does the soul extricate itself and find freedom?

The answer is by way of Torah study and Mitzvos observance. When a Jew studies Torah he feels liberated. Likewise, when a Jew fulfills a Mitzvah, his or her soul is given the opportunity to express itself. The rationale for this is that the Mitzvah refines the Animal Soul and the body and then they are not as resistant to the soul’s voice. When there is less static, the sounds from within can be heard.

More specifically, the observance of Shabbos is a day of liberation. We are freed from weekday entanglements. We speak of Shabbos as a “remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt,” because Shabbos is very much a day when the soul experiences freedom.

Another avenue for the soul to be liberated is prayer. When a person meditates on the world of prayer and feels G-dliness, his soul becomes alive with passion for G-d.

Tefillin: the Unique Path to Liberation

There is something unique about the way Tefillin specifically have the power of liberation.

Tefillin, too, have the capacity to liberate the soul from its confinement within the body. Tefillin are certainly no lesser a Mitzvah than all the rest, which are themselves capable of liberating the soul.

Tefillin, specifically, refine the person and remove the obstructions that suppress the soul.

Tefillin also contain the Shema which, in addition to its declaration of G-d’s oneness and our love for Him, contains the section that deals with the Exodus from Egypt—the very theme of liberation.

And while Shabbos also stresses its role as a force of liberation, the way we are liberated is passive, by not doing work. Moreover, Shabbos, as prayer, is a time when we escape the physical as much as possible to be liberated. Tefillin, by contrast, involve physical action.

The theme of liberation is pervasive in Jewish practice. Many of the Mitzvos focus on the Exodus, but Tefillin is the only Mitzvah in which we do not just mention the Exodus, we actually wear it on, and bind it to, our bodies.

The theme of freedom and liberation inherent in the Mitzvah of Tefillin explains why a slave did not wear Tefillin. In ancient times, a slave owned by a Jew had to be treated humanely and was initiated into Jewish practice. For most intents and purposes he was a Jew. If a master puts Tefillin on his slave, he goes out free. One may suggest that Tefillin and slavery are mutually exclusive.

One does not have to wax mystically to demonstrate how Tefillin are a symbol of freedom. As was mentioned before, Tefillin—particularly the Shel Rosh—are crowns and symbolize royalty. A king is the freest of people since he is a total master of his environment.

Tefillin endow us with power to be masters of the most formidable power: our inner impulses and drives. Conquering one's passion and suppressing one's temptations is the ultimate sign of royalty and of freedom. There is no greater form of slavery than subservience to one's own addictions and there is no greater manifestation of freedom than to be in control of oneself.

In Hebrew, the word for king is melech. It has been stated that this word is an acronym for mo'ach-brain, lev-heart and kaved-liver. A king is one whose mind is master over his heart-emotions and liver, which is filled with blood and therefore represents the base animalistic drives.

One whose animal nature and emotions control him is not a free person and is the antithesis of royalty. If we rearrange the letters of melech to reflect the way a person is controlled by emotion or base instincts and animalistic drives, the words lemech or calem, respectively, are formed. Lemech was a tragic Biblical figure, and is also used as the personalization of a loser. Following one's emotions is a sure prescription for failure. Calem is Hebrew for destruction, because allowing one to be controlled by base instincts will lead to self-destruction.

And addicted we are. As a people, one can arguably declare, there has never been a time in history when people have been more enslaved and addicted. In addition to the usual addictions of alcohol, drugs, sex and gambling, our society is further addicted to technology and entertainment.

A king, the Talmud states has the legal right to break through fences and barriers on his journeys. This power can be applied to a person who behaves in a morally regal fashion. The barriers posed by our emotions and impulses can be overcome when one is in control of his mind.

The same term for “breaking through” boundaries (Poretz) is used to describe Moshiach’s role as the “Poretz” who will remove all the impediments to true liberation and freedom.

The Talmud also ascribes the power to “uproot mountains” to a king: “The king decrees and the mountain is uprooted.” The Rebbe applies this to the ability of a person whose moral mindset is that of a king to uproot the “mountain”, a Talmudic metaphor for the evil impulse.

Tefillin, with its capacity to empower us to exercise control over our inner weaknesses, is the ultimate liberating Mitzvah.

This idea is further reflected in several of the laws associated with Tefillin:

First, Tefillin are placed on the left or weaker arm. The idea of Tefillin is to overcome our weaknesses by binding them to the Tefillin, which represents the awareness of G-d’s unity.

Second, Tefillin are placed on the head and near the heart to indicate that one must control one’s emotions and have them function only in the context of the awareness of one G-d that originates in our minds.

Third, the person who wears Tefillin must surrender the mind to G-d’s will, which is the main topic of meditation required when putting on Tefillin, as will be explained in the next chapter. This ability to exercise total mastery of all of one’s faculties is a Messianic phenomenon.

Fourth, all of the materials that make the Tefillin, the scrolls, boxes, threads and straps must be made from the hide, sinews and hair of an animal. This, too, indicates how the goal of Tefillin is to subjugate the animal within us, as discussed in the preceding chapters.

Fifth, the straps of the Shel Rosh must be suspended downward towards the lower part of the body to indicate that the mind must control and sanctify even the basest aspects of our lives.

There is one final and, perhaps, most important point about the liberating aspect of Tefillin.

Rashi states that one of the reasons we perform Mitvzos in the present day and age, notwithstanding the diminished character of exile Mitzvos, is to prepare us for the time of the future Redemption. When we will finally be liberated by Moshiach, we will have already experienced observance of the Mitzvos. Rashi’s example of a Mitzvah that we do now in preparation for the future, is Tefillin. This can be understood to mean that the Tefillin we wear now as a symbol of liberation is also the catalyst for the ultimate Redemption.

Individual and Universal Liberation

We are taught that the individual and the community share a reciprocal relationship. Whatever affects the individual affects the community and vice versa. A person is a microcosm, a "miniature world" and the world is "a large body.

Tefillin, which bring about personal liberation, are also a force that generates the energies to that hasten the collective liberation of the entire Jewish people and, indeed, of the entire world.

Mourning and Exile

One of the laws concerning Tefillin is that a person who suffers bereavement is exempted from Tefillin. The Talmud bases this law on a verse in the Book of Yechezkal where G-d tells the prophet not to mourn and to keep his p'er-beauty on him. From this, the Talmud derives that any other mourner has to remove his beauty, i.e., his Tefillin, in the initial stages of mourning (up to the burial).

The Talmud describes the procedures for special fast days and prayers in times of drought. They would place ashes on their heads, specifically on the place where Tefillin are normally worn. In support of this custom, the Talmud quotes a verse in Isaiah where it says: "For the mourners of Zion, to place efer-ashes in the place of p'eir-beauty." The words "ashes" and "beauty" share the same letters, rearranged.

The removal of Tefillin and the placing of ashes, the symbol of mourning, in its place points to the Tefillin's power to negate mourning.

Thus, it is customary on Tisha B'Av, the national day of mourning, not to don the Tefillin in the morning, because Tefillin and mourning are diametrically opposite concepts.

What is it about Tefillin that conflicts with mourning?

Tefillin, as noted, are referred to as "our beauty." Tefillin are also likened to a crown; they are a sign of royalty. Expressions of beauty, elegance and royalty are inconsistent with the mindset of a mourner.

This explains why the Sages banned the wearing of the customary crowns by bridegrooms on the day of their wedding after the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman General Vespasian. In times of exile, when we are subjugated and oppressed by other nations, we can hardly act like royalty. That would be a callous gesture, ignoring the bitter reality of our existence, the loss of our ancient independence,

destruction of our Holy Temple and all the suffering and indignities of exile.

Having said all this, it is then remarkable that we wear Tefillin even though we are in exile. This may be attributed to the fact that G-d wanted us to survive the exile and to afford us the opportunity ultimately to be liberated. If, G-d forbid, we had lost this Mitzvah, our subjugation and subordination to the nations of the world would have been complete and we could never hope to be liberated.

Thus, Tefillin represent the power of the Jew to remain free even in exile as well as the power to remove the shackles of exile and eventually usher in the Messianic Age.

With this in mind, we can better understand G-d's instructions to Yechezkel to not remove his Tefillin despite being in the state of mourning.

Yechezkal was one of the prophets of exile, yet G-d instructed him in how to build the Beis Hamikdash. G-d wanted to provide him with the secret of survival in exile and the means to be liberated from it.

The Midrash states that Yechezkal was baffled when G-d told him how to build the Holy Temple. Why would he need to know how to build a Temple that was far from being rebuilt, particularly at the commencement of exile?

G-d's response to him, the Midrash says, was: "Learning what the Torah says about its construction is greater than the actual construction. Go tell them so that they will engage in learning what the Torah says about its dimensions. As a reward for this study… I will regard it as if they were actually engaged in the actual construction of the Temple."

By giving Yechezkal the instructions needed to build the Beis Hamikdash, G-d was enabling us to possess it, even in exile, even when it still lies in ruins.

From the above citation of the Midrash, two points emerge: By learning about the Temple in exile it is considered as if we are actually building it and even preferable to its actual building. Second, learning about its construction will hasten the time when the exile will end and we will then be able to translate our knowledge into action.

Tefillin: A Miniature Beis Hamikdash

Tefillin have been likened to the Beis Hamikdash in the Zohar. Through wearing Tefillin we fulfill the dictate "Make for Me a

Sanctuary, and I will dwell in them." G-d dwells upon us when we wear our Tefillin.

If we extend the analogy of Tefillin as Sanctuary, we may suggest that Tefillin possess two functions: First, they empower us to negate the exile. While in exile we can experience spiritual freedom through and in the medium of Tefillin. Second, Tefillin empower us to break through the exile and experience the ultimate Redemption through Moshiach.

At the same time G-d told the prophet Yechezkal that the secret of our survival in exile was to learn about and live the Beis Hamikdash, He also told him not to remove his Tefillin, even though he was in the state of deepest mourning. This was G-d's "hint" to him that Tefillin is the antidote to getting lost in exile as well as the empowerment for Geulah-ultimate Redemption.

Chassidic thought also speaks of how Tefillin (Shel Rosh in particular) generate an unfiltered G-dly light, unlike all the other Mitzvos, which will only acquire that capability in the Messianic Age. Hence, Tefillin Shel Rosh is a taste of the future and can prepare us for that lofty experience.

One final thought about the capacity of the Mitzvah of Tefillin to prepare us for and even give us a taste of the future Redemption.

The Rebbe addressed the subject of joy in the pre-Messianic Age. The Psalmist declares: "Then [in the Messianic Age] our mouths will be filled with laughter." This prompted the Talmudic Sages to say: "It is forbidden to fill our mouths with laughter in this world." Nevertheless, the Rebbe proved that the Talmud qualified its prohibition by retelling an incident in which a Talmudic Sage expressed considerable laughter and joy while wearing Tefillin. This indicates that the joy associated with a Mitzvah is permissible and indeed necessary. And it is this expression of joy that hastens even more the fulfillment of the prophetic promise: "Then our mouths will be filled with laughter."

The fact that this incident of joy and laughter occurred with the Mitzvah of Tefillin suggests that Tefillin, in particular, have the capacity to prepare us for the joy of the future Era of Redemption.

CHAPTER TEN: KAVVANAH AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

The Soul of a Mitzvah

Tefillin, we have already seen, are more than just one or two of 613 Mitzvos. Tefillin are emblematic and representative of the most salient features of all the Mitzvos. It is the ultimate paradigmatic Mitzvah. As we have seen, Tefillin exemplify the idea of doing a Mitzvah because it is G-d's command. Tefillin also epitomize the idea of bonding with G-d, as the etymology of the word Tefillin suggests.

In addition to all of the above, Tefillin also exemplify the notion of spirituality, arguably, more than most Mitzvos.

To understand the spiritual dimension of Tefillin we must first understand the value of spirituality in Judaism, especially as it pertains to Mitzvos.

On the one hand, the most important aspect and objective of a Mitzvah is its actual physical performance. To perform the Mitzvah in a sterile fashion is preferable to meditating on the spiritual aspects of the Mitzvah without actually doing the Mitzvah. This is consistent with the abovementioned premise that the act of the Mitzvah itself constitutes the highest form of devotion to G-d and creates the ultimate bond with Him.

Having said that, Judaism also places a premium on the role of kavvanah-intent and concentration in the performance of the Mitzvah.

If the act of the Mitzvah is its body, then the emotional and spiritual feelings generated while doing the Mitzvah is its soul. The kavvanah brings light into the Mitzvah and imbues the Mitzvah with life.

A Mitzvah performed without love and awe is like a body without a soul or like a bird whose wings are clipped. As the Alter Rebbe explains, a bird without wings is still kosher, but it cannot fly. Likewise a Mitzvah without feeling is an acceptable Mitzvah—it satisfies our basic obligation and creates a bond with G-d—but it does not soar to the heavens.

Hence the ideal way of doing a Mitzvah is to combine meticulous attention to detail with profound spiritual emotion.

No Mental Distractions

Of all the Mitzvos, the Mitzvah of Tefillin stands out for the spiritual state of mind that it requires.

To begin, the Talmud states that we may not distract ourselves from the Tefillin we are wearing. This is derived from the tzitz, the plate the High Priest wore on his forehead, which contained G-d's name engraved in it. The Talmud reasons logically: "If the High Priest could not distract himself from the tzitz, as long as he wore it, although it had G-d's name inscribed on it only once, how much more so Tefillin which has G-d's name written in it multiple times."

The seriousness of this law is such that the Jewish tradition confined the wearing of Tefillin to the time of prayer, even though we are supposed to wear them the entire day. The concern is that by wearing them all day, we would be distracted which would compromise the integrity of the Mitzvah.

So strict is the requirement for body and mind to be pure while wearing Tefillin that there were periods in Jewish history where otherwise conscientious Jews, who were scrupulous in the observance of every Mitzvah, desisted from wearing Tefillin because they felt spiritually inadequate. In addition, boys under the age of Bar Mitzvah are generally discouraged from wearing Tefillin, even though we get children to perform other Mitzvos as part of their training. The rules against being distracted along with requirements of keeping a clean body are too demanding for children and we don't want to sacrifice the integrity of the Mitzvah.

In this regard, Tefillin are unparalleled.

Tefillin Meditation

Moreover, there is a special thought and meditation that ought to accompany one's donning of Tefillin. The person has to reflect on how the Tefillin represent the subservience of one's heart and mind to G-d. I

The full meditation is described by the Alter Rebbe thus:

"One should concentrate when putting on the Tefillin that G-d commanded us to write these four Torah sections that contain the unity of His name and the Exodus from Egypt. One is to place them on the arm opposite the heart and on the head above the brain so that we remember the miracles and wonders He wrought for us. They attest to His unity and that He has the power and the mastery to act in the upper and lower realms as He pleases. One should subjugate his heart to serving Him, may He be blessed. And through putting on the

Tefillin he will remember the Creator and minimize his physical pleasures."

Again, this elaborate meditation is absent in other Mitzvos. In regard to other Mitzvos, the thought that ought to accompany their performance is simply the awareness that one is performing the Mitzvah to fulfill an obligation to G-d. It does not overtly and consciously involve surrender of one's mind and heart to G-d. It does not require thinking about G-d's unity and the miracles of the Exodus.

Obviously, these meditations should ideally be applied to every Mitzvah. However, Tefillin is unique in that these meditations are basic for Tefillin. Moreover, the very act of placing the Tefillin near our heart and on our head illustrates and dramatizes the role and nature of one's spiritual mindset. The fact that Tefillin actually contain the concept of G-d's unity and the miracles of the Exodus in them makes Tefillin unique. If we extend these meditations to other Mitzvos we are merely borrowing this kavvanah from Tefillin.

Meditation: An Integral Part of the Mitzvah

Moreover, with regard to other Mitzvos, the kavvanah that is required is not considered to be an integral part of the Mitzvah. The kavvanah demanded by Tefillin, in contrast, is an integral and inseparable part of the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

All of the above point to the special relationship of Tefillin to the spiritual dimension of the Mitzvah.

Tefillin, in effect, represent the ultimate synthesis of body and soul. In terms of the body of the Mitzvah it is the paradigmatic Mitzvah, as explained in earlier chapters, and likewise in terms of the spirituality that ideally should accompany a Mitzvah, Tefillin is the ultimate model for that as well.

Opening Windows

The word Kavvanah, which is usually translated as intent, concentration or focus is also related to a Biblical Aramaic word, which means window.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe) applies this meaning to the idea of kavvanah. There are blockages between the mind and the heart and the heart and one's actions. Frequently a person will have a sound understanding of a spiritual concept concerning G-d but it would translate into his emotions. Similarly, one can get emotional about Judaism without being able to translate that energy into action.

The meaning of kavannah then is the opening of “windows” to enable the mind to affect the emotions of the heart and emotions to affect our behavior.

If kavvanah is the opening of windows between our minds and our hearts and our hearts and our actions, then there is no Mitzvah as potent as Tefillin. Tefillin is all about the coordination of the mind, heart and arms and, therefore, has the capacity to accomplish this opening of windows.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: TEFILLIN IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLDS

Spiritual Hydrogen Bombs

While Mitzvos are physical actions, we are taught that each Mitzvah act generates spiritual energy.

The greatest challenge to this fact comes from our own experiences. Very few people actually feel these spiritual energies. Whatever spiritual excitement one feels while performing a Mitzvah may be psychological and very subjective. In truth, the Mitzvah itself, regardless of the person’s own feelings, generates incredible surges of G-dly energy.

If we were to use our own limited human vocabulary, we could compare the effects of each Mitzvah to the energy released with the explosion of a hydrogen bomb.

But where does that energy go?

While some of the energy released stays here on earth and helps to refine and elevate it, the bulk of the spiritual energy is stored in a "bank." Kabbalah teaches us that there are multiple layers of spiritual worlds. When a Mitzvah is performed, the spiritual energy is stored in these worlds which are receptive to spirituality.

Once they are stored in the “bank” one could make withdrawals from their account and bask in the incredible spiritual light. The ability to withdraw from these banks is determined by the degree to which a person is in touch and in tune with the spiritual realms.

The rest of us will have to wait for the Messianic Age. Then we will all be receptive to the G-dly light that will shine brightly and we will be able to make these withdrawals.

It does not mean that we cannot access any of the spiritual energy now. We can reap the dividends now, but the principal we will get in the future.

Unrestrained Spirituality

All Mitzvos that we perform generate this spiritual energy, but there is something unique about the spiritual energy unleashed by performing this Mitzvah.

The Tzemach Tzedek (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe) elaborates on the unparalleled elicitation of Divine energy that is unique for the Head Tefillin:

"…[I]n the upper worlds there is a difference between the generation of spiritual light through the observance of the 248 positive commandments and the generation of light through the observance of the negative commandments and the Head Tefillin. The light, generated, by observing the 248 positive Mitzvos is contained, even there [i.e., in the spiritual realms], whereas the energy released through observance of the negative commandments and the Head Tefillin are fully revealed. It is possible that even in the future [Messianic Age] these Mitzvos will enjoy a greater measure of G-dly revelation."

To better comprehend these cryptic words, the following synopsis of one section of the discourse with some elaboration will be helpful.

It is axiomatic in the teachings of Kabbalah and Chassidus that every action of ours has a cosmic effect. This is much more so when we perform a Mitzvah. However, every Mitzvah has its own individualized level of spiritual effects.

In general terms, there are two distinct ways a Mitzvah impacts the cosmos:

Included in the first category are the so-called positive or "prescriptive" commandments. These are the Mitzvos that involve action. The very fact that they involve precise actions suggests that the Divine energy that these Mitzvos unleash is capable of being accessed through specified actions. These prescriptive Mitzvos are "vessels" that contain the energy. And since the energy is contained in these vessels they cannot be more powerful than the vessels can endure. These Mitzvos as referred to as "the organs of the King." This metaphor suggests that just as the organs of the human body are the instruments that are receptive to and conduct the soul's life-force, so too the Mitzvos are receptive to and conduct Divine energy. And just as each limb has a variegated function—the kidney transmits a

different energy than the liver, and so on—so too each Mitzvah is designed to generate a particular form of light.

The metaphor also suggests that just as the soul's energy channeled through the bodily organs is contracted and attenuated, so too, the Divine energy that is expressed through these Mitzvos lacks the full intensity of G-d's Infinite light. This is even true in the highest of the spiritual worlds. When the energy filters down into our physical world, it is hardly discernible. Only in the future Messianic Age, concerning which it is stated: "Your Master shall no longer be cloaked," will G-d's energy be released without any screen or filter.

By contrast, the so-called negative or "proscriptive" Mitzvos are passive and therefore represent an open ended, unfiltered and limitless receptivity to all the Divine energies.

There is a notable exception to this distinction between the active and passive Mitzvos, and that is the Tefillin Shel Rosh-the Head Tefillin. The extraordinary, unfiltered Divine light generated through the wearing of the Head Tefillin is represented by the way these Tefillin are worn in the most conspicuous and unabashed manner. While the Hand Tefillin are not intended to be exposed—in the words of the Talmud: "they are a sign for yourself"—the Tefillin Shel Rosh is intended to be seen by others, even by the nations of the world.

Tefillin Shel Rosh therefore generates unfiltered light in all of the supernal worlds. They even have an impact on our physical world in ways that are not discernible in the performance of other Mitzvos.

The Obsession for Detail

We can now understand why even the slightest mistake in the lettering of the scrolls contained in the Tefillin invalidate them. (The same is true for a Mezuzah and Torah Scroll. However, the same strict requirements for the Tefillin scrolls also apply to the batim-the encasement of the Tefillin, the boxes in which the scrolls are housed, unlike the casing of a Mezuzah and the cover of a Torah Scroll. If the Tefillin boxes are not perfectly square, for example, they are not fit to fulfill the Mitzvah.

Why is there such an obsession with detail?

The answer is that each detail is crucial for the generation of G-dly light. Just like a space ship that experiences the slightest malfunctioning piece of equipment could, no matter how trivial that piece may be, abort the entire journey.

Similarly, each nuance associated with the Mitzvah is crucial. Any deviation from the "Divine Engineer's" design for the Mitzvah of Tefillin will cause failure. The spiritual energy that it is supposed to release will remain untapped.

CHAPTER TWELVE: SOURCE OF LIFE AND JOY

Life within Life

Another related benefit that flows from the Mitzvah of Tefillin in particular is its capacity to instill both life and light.

In truth, each and every Mitzvah is life-sustaining. The Torah states: "These are the Mitzvos you shall do and live with them." A cardinal principle of Judaism is that a Jew was given Mitzvos to transform his or her life into a life worthy of its name. Mitzvos were not given for us to die for, although in some extreme cases Judaism obligates us to die rather than to transgress them.

Mitzvos instill life into us in more than the spiritual sense of the word. Even our physical lives are very much a product of our Mitzvah observance.

Of Torah and Mitzvos it is said, "For they are our lives and the length of our days." Or: "It is a tree of life for those who hold on to it."

There is an important reference in the Nevi'im to the special emphasis on Tefillin's life-sustaining capacity. The prophet Isaiah states: "G-d is upon them they shall live." The Talmud applies this verse to the one who wears Tefillin because Tefillin contain G-d's name. By placing the Tefillin on our heads and arms, we become energized with G-d's life-sustaining energy.

Four Dimensions of Mitzvah Joy

Tefillin are also connected with joy. The Talmud describes the joy one of the Sages experienced because he wore Tefillin.

Mitzvos in general bring joy and fulfillment to the person who performs them, as the Psalmist states: "The commandments of G-d are just they gladden the heart."

This can be attributed to several factors:

First, performing a Mitzvah gives one a sense of satisfaction that he or she has fulfilled G-d's will. It is natural for human beings to feel good when they do something they know is good, even if they did not initially want to do it.

Second, human beings want to find meaning in their lives. Even secular psychologists have come to the conclusion that we are motivated by the quest to find meaning in life. Mitzvos undoubtedly endow our lives with meaning and purpose.

A Mitzvah can take an otherwise meaningless, boring and quotidian activity and transform it into a meaningful experience. Walking down a supermarket aisle is not one of the most exciting and meaningful activities. However, when one looks for kosher food by identifying a kosher insignia on a given product, it turns this entire exercise into one that is meaningful. It becomes a spiritual exercise that is no less a G-dly pursuit than a heartfelt prayer on Yom Kippur!

Third, G-d is the source of joy and happiness. When one is connected to G-d, he is "infected" with His divine joy.

Fourth, joy is the natural and default position of our soul, which is a part of G-d. To the extent that the soul is not allowed to express itself, because its feelings are covered and obstructed by our Animal Soul and our body, the soul's joy is diminished. If, however, we remove the obstructions—which a Mitzvah is designed to do—we are closer to our soul's consciousness and its natural feeling of joy.

Mitzvos as Therapy

Moreover, depression and anxiety can be directly attributed to the soul's feeling that its needs are not being taken care of. The soul is sent down to this world for a purpose. When the soul senses that the person is going in the opposite direction, the soul cries out to the conscious mind and declares: "Please, turn around and go in the direction that will lead me to the purpose for which I am here in this world!"

When we feel depressed or anxious we may need to consider approaches the Torah supports —remedies, exercises, counseling and/or medication. We must also reflect on the direction our lives have taken. When our soul feels that it is going in the right direction, it will experience a tremendous surge of joy, even ecstasy. The person can experience a real high.

Many complain that once they have turned their lives around to follow in the path of Torah and Mitzvos, after the initial feeling of exhilaration they lose their enthusiasm and no longer feel inspired.

One of the answers to this dilemma lies in the reason one experiences that initial surge of energy and joy. When the undernourished soul feels it is being led away from its intended destination, but finally begins to see that the person is making an effort to turn round, it becomes ecstatic.

However, once we are traveling in the right direction, with occasional small detours here and there, the soul no longer feels threatened that it will not make it. Hence, the anxiety level is greatly reduced, but simultaneously, the level of enthusiasm is also diminished. The soul no longer senses that it has been saved. The advances the person makes are not new and radical, but gradual and incremental so the level of joy and excitement is commensurately diminished.

To experience a new surge of joy and energy we were given special occasions, such as Shabbos and Jewish Festivals. In Chassidic circles the idea of farbrengens is viewed, among other benefits, as spiritual therapy sessions because they help dispel depression and restore the natural feelings of joy.

The Joy of Tefillin

However, in addition to the special occasions that are designed to inspire and excite us, there is one Mitzvah in particular associated with joy and that is the Mitzvah of Tefillin as is indicated by the story in the abovementioned citation from the Talmud.

What is it about Tefillin, more so than all other Mitzvos, that generates this feeling of joy?

The Maharal explains that from the perspective of a created being in relation to his Creator, joy is unwarranted. Instead, a created being must always have reverence for his Creator. In the Maharal's philosophy, it is unimaginable that we should be capable of expressing joy when we are overwhelmed by the awesome realization that we are but lime clay in the hands of the potter. How can puny creatures claim their own expansive feelings of joy when they are aware of the greatness and majesty of their Creator.

However, when we wear Tefillin, the Maharal explains, we have the name of G-d on us, hence our joy is, in actuality, a reflection of G-d's joy.

In other words, true joy for a human being is elusive because we are mere creatures who have no intrinsic independent value. Our value is measured by the degree to which we reflect our G-dly nature and connection.

While every Mitzvah serves to express the G-dly state that allows us to experience joy, Tefillin, which bind the name of G-d onto our bodies and consciousness, render us G-dly beings. We are then entitled to experience Divine joy.

One of the underlying causes of depression is a sense of worthlessness. To combat depression, the secular psychological community developed therapeutic techniques to emphasize the importance of high self-esteem.

Upon reflection, this is not an ideal solution to depression because it is not based on objective truth. Why should people feel good about themselves if they are failures? And if they are truly gifted, heightened focus on their gifts could lead to arrogance and an inflated ego, which in turn, leads them back into depression. Egotists are depressed because they feel that life has dealt them a raw deal. In their minds, they deserve so much more. The more they feel they deserve, the more elusive the procurement of their goals.

The real solution to depression is not improved self-esteem because the cause of depression is not a lack of self-esteem. The solution is G-d esteem, which taps into the G-dly reality of our existence. When we know that our assets are really gifts from G-d and that our soul is connected to Him, we begin to feel G-dly joy.

Of all the Mitzvos that engender this G-dly feeling, Tefillin stand out. There is no other Mitzvah that so connects and binds our physical existence to the Divine. Prayer is obviously G-d oriented but in comparison with Tefillin it is solely a spiritual exercise. Tefillin combine the spirit of prayer with the physical action of other Mitzvos. In addition, Tefillin actually bind the spiritual (the name of G-d) to the body.

Of course, the ideal way of fulfilling the Mitzvah of Tefillin is to do it while praying, as the Talmud states. This provides us with spiritual consciousness and other spiritual benefits.

More specifically, let us review the four reasons that Mitzvos bring joy.

First, one feels the sense of satisfaction that he or she has fulfilled G-d's will. As discussed above, the Mitzvah of Tefillin is emblematic of the idea of fulfilling G-d's will for no other reason than it is the will of

G-d that we do so. When one performs a Mitzvah that appeals to one's own reason, the joy and satisfaction may be considerable, but they are limited by the degree to which they are understood. By definition, that joy is finite.

When one performs a Mitzvah purely because it is G-d's will, the sense of satisfaction and joy is commensurate with G-d's joy and satisfaction. That joy is indeed infinite. Tefillin, with its simple message of "I am doing G-d's will" can be the source of unlimited joy and satisfaction.

Second, human beings want to find meaning in their lives. What gives people a sense of meaning? The most obvious answer is that it arises when they feel they have made a positive difference. For example, if one is endowed with a talent for music, shows prowess and promise in that direction but fails to become a musician, he or she will feel diminished and dejected by falling short of his or her potential.

In effect, finding meaning in life requires that people feel that they made a difference and that they have fulfilled their potential.

As Jews, we know what our general purpose is in life. Torah is not a history book or even a book of laws. It is, first and foremost, a book of guidance and direction. If we want to know the Torah's view of the purpose of existence, a Talmudic statement provides us with a clear answer: "I am created to serve my Maker."

Where is this notion, that we are here to serve our Maker, vividly articulated? In the act of putting on Tefillin, this dynamic is dramatically played out. As noted above, laying the Hand Tefillin before the Head Tefillin dramatizes how unconditional surrender to G-d's will precedes other intellectual approaches to Judaism.

Tefillin are endowed with multifarious benefits for the one who wears them and for the entire world. This realization, that Tefillin get us closer to realizing our potential and justifying our raison d'etre, in and of itself can be a major source of satisfaction and joy.

Third, G-d is the ultimate source of all joy and happiness. When one is connected to G-d—which state is most pronounced with Tefillin—he will be "infected" with His divine joy, according to the teachings of the Maharal quoted above.

Fourth, the soul, which is a part of G-d, is by nature in a state of joy. To the extent that our G-dly souls are covered and obstructed by our Animal Souls and bodies, the soul's joy is diminished. When we remove the obstructive nature of the Animal Soul, the G-dly soul's natural energy and joy are activated and fully expressed. Since Tefillin

discipline and refine the Animal Soul and thereby liberate the Divine Soul, they are the paradigmatic source of joy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: JEWISH STRENGTH, PROTECTION AND GLORY

Protection

Every Mitzvah we perform has protective benefits. Tefillin occupy a special place in this regard.

The Talmud relates an incident involving the Sage Elisha, who was nicknamed "Elisha the Master of Wings." The background for this title, the Talmud states, relates to a decree issued by the Romans banning Tefillin. "Anyone putting on Tefillin will have his brains pierced (the place where Tefillin placed – Rashi). Elisha put on his Tefillin, and went outside to the marketplace. A Roman official spotted him, and Elisha ran away. The official chased after him. When Elisha saw that he was coming close to him, he removed the Tefillin from his head and held them in his hand. The officer demanded: 'What is that in your hand?' Elisha replied, 'The wings of a dove.' Then he opened up his hand, and inside were the wings of a dove."

The Talmud then raises the question:

"Why a dove more than any other bird?" The answer is:

"The people of Israel are likened to a dove, as it is stated, 'The wings of a dove covered with silver….' Just as the wings of the dove protect the bird, the same is true with Mitzvos; they protect them."

It is interesting to note that although the Talmud makes a blanket statement concerning the protective force of Mitzvos, the model for this protective power is the Mitzvah of Tefillin. This would indicate that of all the Mitzvos, Tefillin possess a special protective quality.

The Maharal suggests that the uniqueness of Tefillin, as a protection, is due to the fact that Tefillin involve binding G-d's name on us.

Jewish Strength

To shed further light on the unique protective power of Tefillin, let us refer to another passage in the Talmud which describes Tefillin as oz-Jewish strength, in the context of protection from the malevolent nations of the world.

The Talmud applies the Biblical verse, "And all the nations will see the name of G-d called upon you and they will fear you" to the Mitzvah of Tefillin Shel Rosh-the Head Tefillin."

In the Chassidic Discourse that is traditionally recited by a Bar Mitzvah boy, the Rebbe Maharash describes the effects of Tefillin on the Jewish nation.

The Talmud states:

"How do we know that the Holy One, Blessed is He, wears Tefillin? It is stated: 'G-d has sworn by His right hand and by the arm of His strength.' 'By His right hand' is Torah, as it is stated, 'From His right hand [He gave] the fiery Torah to them.' 'And by the arm of His strength' [alludes to] Tefillin, as it is stated 'G-d will give strength to His people.'"

The Talmud then proceeds to explain how we know that Tefillin are Israel's strength:

"It is written, 'All the nations of the world will see that the name of G-d is called upon you and they will fear you.' And it was taught in a Bereisa: Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: These are the Tefillin [worn] on the head."

The Talmud then proceeds to enquire:

"These Tefillin of the Master of the Universe, what is written in them?"

The Talmud replies by citing several verses extolling the greatness of the Jewish people. The first verse mentioned is:

"And who is like Your people Israel, one nation in the land."

The Talmud then substantiates that it is indeed G-d's way to praise the Jewish people and that there is a reciprocal relationship between G-d and Israel.

In effect, the Rebbe Maharash concludes, when we put on our Tefillin, G-d puts on His Tefillin, which extol the singular importance of the Jewish people. Putting on Tefillin enhances our position.

A story is told of the legendary Chassidic Master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who was wont to plead the case of the Jewish nation before G-d:

"G-d," he cried, "the Jewish people are your Tefillin! When Tefillin fall to the ground, G-d forbid, a Jew quickly picks them up, caresses and kisses them. Your Tefillin, the children of Israel, have fallen in exile, why don't You pick them up, caress and kiss them?"

The Rebbe Maharash refers to the way the Midrash equates Tefillin to Torah study and draws another analogy from this equation.

Quoting a verse in the Torah which records the prayer of a Jew who brought his tithes to Jerusalem:

"…look down from Your holy abode in heaven, and bless Your people Israel…" The Hebrew word for "heaven" here is shamayim, which is also a metaphor for Torah. When G-d looks down at us from the perspective of Torah, it is like looking through a magnifying glass. Our plea to G-d is that He look at us through the prism of Torah so our value will be enhanced.

The Rebbe Maharash then draws a parallel from Torah study to Tefillin:

Just as Torah study is like a magnifying glass through which G-d looks at us and sees us in a magnified and more conspicuous fashion, so too, through the Mitzvah of Tefillin our uniqueness is highlighted.

We can now understand why Tefillin give strength to the Jewish Nation. By putting on Tefillin we cement our relationship with G-d and allow His love for us to become much more apparent. That endows us with great Divine protection and strength.

Tefillin Campaign

On the eve of the Six Day War, and from that time onward, the Rebbe launched a massive Tefillin campaign, citing the foregoing passage of the Talmud. The Rebbe declared that through the Mitzvah of Tefillin, the Jewish people would instill fear into the hearts of those who sought to push us into the sea, G-d forbid.

The strength of Tefillin to protect the Jewish people, especially in times of war, is cited by yet another source.

The Rosh cites the Biblical verse referring to the physical and military prowess of the Tribe of Gad in their battles during the conquest of Israel. In Moses' last words of blessing to the Jewish people, he addressed the tribe of Gad with the following accolade:

“About Gad he said: ‘…He will tear off an arm with the head.’”

Rashi explains that Gad’s strength enabled their warriors to sever both the arm and the head of their enemies with one blow.

Rosh applies this allegorically to the Mitzvah of Tefillin, which are worn on the arm and the head. He writes: “because of the Mitzvah of Tefillin and their repair the soldiers will be endowed with the ability to tear the arm and the head off the enemy.”

Further support for the effect Tefillin have on the attitude of the Nations of the World towards the Jewish people can be found in the story of Purim. The Book of Esther describes the aftermath of the miracle: “The Jews had light, gladness, joy and glory.” The Talmud says that the term glory refers specifically here to Tefillin and cites the application of the verse “And all the nations of the world will see the name of G-d called upon you and they will fear you” to Tefillin. The Talmud’s concept of glory is the same as strength mentioned in the earlier citation.

The Rebbe explains that there is a direct connection between the Tefillin-glory mentioned here and an earlier verse that says, “Many of the people became Jewish because the fear of the Jews was upon them.”

One additional source that reinforces our understanding of the power of Tefillin and the fear and respect it engenders is the Midrash on Tehillim on the verse, “Let us sever their ropes and cast away…” This, the Midrash states refers to both the Hand Tefillin and Head Tefillin. When the Nations of the World rage against us we need the full strength and support of the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

The Beauty of Tefillin

In addition to the attributes of strength and glory that are ascribed to Tefillin, they are also called P’eir, which means beauty.

This adds another dimension to the way the Jewish people are viewed by others. Whereas Tefillin endow Israel with the strength that evokes feelings of fear and awe from other nations, as mentioned before, Tefillin also generate feelings of admiration because they express the idea of true beauty.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE ULTIMATE REWARD

The Paradox of Reward

As we shall see, there is something unique about the reward promised for observance of the Mitzvah of Tefillin. But first let us discuss the entire concept of reward.

One of Judaism's paradoxes is that we do not perform a Mitzvah for reward, and, conversely, the Torah promises reward for all of the Mitzvos nevertheless.

How do we relate to reward? If reward is secondary to the actual Mitzvah, why focus on it at all?

Is the existence and discussion of reward intended only for those who are not yet ready to do the Mitzvah for no ulterior motive? This would be consistent with the well-known statement in the Talmud: "One should always perform a Mitzvah even if it is for ulterior motives, for from the ulterior motive one will eventually come to do it for pure motives."

There are at least five answers to this question.

According to Rambam, all the rewards in this world that the Torah promises are not really rewards. They are G-d's way of assuring the person who wants to do G-d's will that he or she will be afforded that opportunity. Those who perform the Mitzvos are told that all their needs will be taken care of so that they will have no real impediments to the observance of the Mitzvos.

Thus, knowing that there are rewards helps us past the anxiety that is associated with the lack of our material needs.

A second, deeper, answer is that the reward for the Mitzvah demonstrates that the Mitzvah is so good it can even satisfy the desire of a simple person who is mainly interested in and seeks the reward. That a Mitzvah brings a reward provides us with a glimpse into the perfection of G-d's will, which is so perfect it can manifest itself in physical reward.

A third answer, somewhat similar to the preceding one, is that Torah is our very life force. Torah affects all matters of life, including the physical. When one receives material reward for performing the Mitzvos it is a testament that Torah, for this Jew, is an integral and inseparable part of his life. Hence, the reward is a consequence and demonstration of the extent to which Torah and Mitzvos permeate a

person. Looking for the reward is to gauge to what extent the Torah has affected our being.

To elaborate: If Torah has a superficial effect on the person it means that Torah remains in the realm of spiritual knowledge. The greater the impact the Torah has on the person, the more it is internalized, it will even affect a person's physical beings and fortune. Hence the reward is a barometer of how profound an effect Tefillin has on the person.

A fourth answer applies to a person on a higher level whose interest in a reward is not for his or her own fulfillment and personal gain. The reward for the idealist is in and of itself a way of serving G-d because it is a manifestation of G-d's greatness. The altruist seeks reward not for himself but for G-d's sake.

A fifth reason for the existence of and focus on reward for a Mitzvah is based on the words of the Alter Rebbe in his classic work, the Tanya. There he encapsulates the approach to reward in three Hebrew words: משכרה נדע מהותה -"From the reward we can know its character."

One must investigate the reward for a Mitzvah to understand its true nature. The reward mirrors the character of the Mitzvah and illuminates some of its salient features.

Tefillin and Longevity

When we examine the reward for the Mitzvah of Tefillin we find that it is different from the reward for virtually every other Mitzvah.

The Talmud declares: "Whoever dons Tefillin will live a long life." Rambam and the Alter Rebbe codify this in their restatements of Jewish law. This law is derived from the Biblical verse, "G-d is upon them, they shall live." Rashi explains, "Those who carry G-d's name with Tefillin shall live."

To promise long life in this world for the observance of a Mitzvah is unique because, as a general rule, the Talmud informs us that reward for the observance of Mitzvos does not come in this world (with some exceptions, to be discussed shortly).

There is, though, a notable category of exceptions to this general rule. Rambam maintains that Mitzvos that govern our relationships with others, as opposed to Mitzvos that deal with our relationship with G-d, bring positive results in this physical world during our lifetime.

Rambam explains this distinction thus:

“He will achieve benefit in this world for his conduct; his good conduct with other people, because if he walks in this direction and the other also walks in this direction he will enjoy the benefit.”

In other words, when one does good for others it stimulates reciprocal modes of behavior. Good actions beget other good actions. We can therefore expect to enjoy the fruit of our efforts in this world.

A further question can now be raised,: what does the Talmud mean when it says that observing the Mitzvah of Tefillin brings long life? Were the Sages referring to long life in the most literal sense of the word? If so, it would transgress the general rule that only the social commandments are rewarded in this world. Tefillin, it would seem, are squarely in the category of Mitzvos between man and G-d. There does not seem to be any social context to Tefillin or benefits that flow from it in this world.

We can prove that the promise of long life for Tefillin is to be taken literally with a passage from the Talmud:

“Rav Ada bar Ahavah’s students asked him: ‘What have you done to merit longevity?’ ‘… I did not walk four cubits without Torah and without Tefillin.’”

From this source it is clear that he attributed his longevity to Tefillin despite Tefillin’s inclusion in the man-to-G-d category of Mitzvos. So when the Talmud states that Tefillin bring longevity it means long life in the most literal sense of the word.

One could suggest several approaches to resolving this dilemma:

First: Tefillin, as was mentioned above, empower the Jewish people and endow them with the ability to instill awe and reverence in others. Tefillin also strengthen our ability to survive and thrive in exile. These benefits can easily contribute to longevity since the physical as well as psychological threats to us are diminished by wearing Tefillin.

Second, the Mishnah equates Torah study to all the other commandments “between man and man,” i.e., the social commandments, in the context of those Mitzvos for which the fruit of our efforts are to be enjoyed in this world, and the principal reward in the future.

The Rebbe, anticipating the question, how can Torah study be lumped together with the Mitzvos between man and G-d, answers that Torah, in fact, encompasses all the other Mitzvos because it leads to

their observance, as the Talmud states, "Torah study is great because it leads to action."

In other words, Torah study per se does not have the capacity to generate reward in this world since it is not a Mitzvah between man and man. However, Torah study does generate reward in this world as the catalyst for all of the Mitzvos, including the social Mitzvos. There are two ways one could look at the reward generated by Torah study:

Inasmuch as Torah study will inevitably lead to observance of the social Mitzvos it can thus be said that it will also inevitably lead to enjoying reward in this world.

Alternatively, it may be suggested, by the very fact that Torah study facilitates all of the Mitzvos, it acquires the status of a social commandment.

Based on this premise, we may apply the same logic to Tefillin, which are compared to Torah study in several ways.

First, in the Torah itself when the Mitzvah of Tefillin is mentioned for the very first time. It says: "In order that G-d's Torah shall be in your mouth." Indeed, this verse is the Biblical basis for the Talmudic statement: "The entire Torah is compared to Tefillin." The connection between Tefillin and Torah study is further underscored in the words of the Mechilta: "One who studies Torah is exempted from Tefillin." We also find the converse in the Midrash which relates that the Jewish people said to G-d "we want to study Torah day and night, but we have no time." G-d replied: "Observe the Mitzvah of Tefillin, and I will regard it as if you have studied Torah day and night."

If Torah study can be incorporated into the category of social Mitzvos then Tefillin may also be accorded that distinction.

Third, the Bach explicitly addresses the matter of longevity and its relationship with Tefillin. He writes:

"Because he attached his body to the living G-d by virtue of placing G-d's name on his head near his body, therefore his reward of longevity is in this world, as it is stated: 'You that cleave to G-d are all alive today.' The word 'today' implies in this world; days of physical life in addition to the reward in the world-to-come."

Fourth, Rambam describes the effects of Tefillin: "As long as Tefillin is worn on one's head and arm, he is humble, G-d fearing, not drawn into frivolity, idle talk, nor does he engage in thinking negative thoughts. Rather he directs his heart towards matters of truth and righteousness."

From Rambam's description of the effects of Tefillin it is clear that proper observance of this Mitzvah leads a person to performing all the Mitzvos, including the social ones. Rambam explicitly mentions "righteousness" as one of the effects of Tefillin. Moreover, when one is humble and G-d fearing many of the impediments to good relationships and ethical conduct are removed.

If, as we stated at the beginning of this chapter, knowing the reward of a Mitzvah reveals to us the very character of the Mitzvah, we can now have some measure of appreciation for the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

That Tefillin gives us long life reinforces the connection between Tefillin and life.

The reward for Tefillin underscores the way Tefillin are catalysts to the observance of all the other Mitzvos.

We can now better appreciate why the Rebbe launched a massive effort to get all Jewish men to put on Tefillin daily. In addition to the protection that was—and continues to be—needed, it is also a catalyst and a facilitator of all the other Mitzvos. Indeed, thousands of unaffiliated and secularized Jews have been brought closer to Jewish observance and affiliation because of their encounter with someone who afforded them an opportunity to put on Tefillin.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: JEWISH I.D.

Identity Crisis

We are living in an age of identity obsession. In decades past, we were suffering from identity crisis, now we are identity obsessed. Whether it's gender, race or aspects of one's personality, people are grappling with the question, "Who am I?" searching and finding all new forms of identity.

Perhaps the spiritual reason for this phenomenon is our proximity to the Messianic Age. In the Biblical Book of Daniel reference is made to the time when "all matters will be clarified." In the past, people were not preoccupied with this issue; they had other more immediate and important concerns to occupy them. Today, everybody is obsessed with identity.

A certain very observant Jew who professed to be a rabbi once confessed that he was an atheist. When questioned about his strict adherence to the Torah's precepts in light of his lack of faith in G-d, he answered, "Every person needs an identity. A Native American wears feathers as a sign of who he is. A Jew wears a Tallis and Tefillin, keeps Shabbos and eats kosher. That's my I.D…"

While the "rabbi" was obviously, theologically speaking, off the wall, he was on the mark when he characterized the Mitzvos as the means we use to identify ourselves.

And while the performance of every Mitzvah is our way of identifying ourselves as Jews and showing pride in who we are, there are certain Mitzvos where the idea of identity is more pronounced.

The Three Signs

The Torah itself identifies three Mitzvos as "signs" of our connection to G-d, and hence, our Jewishness. They are Shabbos, circumcision, and Tefillin.

Circumcision is an indelible anatomical mark that is inscribed on males when they are too young to realize its significance. And once it's done, it's permanent; nothing else physical has to ever be done to reinforce this sign of our identity as Jews. The sign of Shabbos is primarily expressed by inaction; refraining from work. Only Tefillin is a conscious, pro-active way of expressing our Jewishness on a daily basis.

Moreover, circumcision is a sign that is covered up by the rules of modesty. It is an entirely private sign. Refraining from work on Shabbos is not always demonstrative of one's identity. One can refrain from work because he or she has nothing to do. Many people sit idle on other days of the week.

Only Tefillin are worn conspicuously and are designed to be visible so that even the nations of the world will see the Tefillin and know that G-d's name is upon us.

Tefillin are therefore the most pro-active and blatant expression of one's Jewishness.

Jewish Pride

Moreover, having an identity and being proud of it are two different matters. There are people who would rather conceal their identity. Tefillin are a dramatic way of showing our identity and our pride in being Jewish.

We are living in an age in which people feel proud about who they are. In some cases, they exhibit pride by flaunting things that should be kept private, and may even be inconsistent with Jewish values and morals.

The fact that people are “into” pride is a positive phenomenon although its application may not be. Feeling pride about one’s identity is a positive feeling when it is intended for our G-dly identities. Free choice allows us to misdirect the feeling of pride to other areas.

Our Uniform

In addition to knowing and showing our identities, there is another category of identity that is more pronounced.

When people enlist in an army or any other endeavor that requires discipline, they wear uniforms. The uniform is more than an I.D. because it not only identifies, it clarifies. An I.D. card can identify a person as a doctor, but when he wears his scrubs and carries a stethoscope around his neck, we look at him with a different eye. We view that person as one who is dedicated to a certain goal and mission.

A Jew is not only one who happens to be a Jew on weekends, holidays, in the synagogue, at life cycles, etc. Being a Jew who lives as a Jew is that person’s most essential identity, which he expresses outwardly by wearing his Jewish uniform.

Of all the “uniforms” a Jew wears, Tefillin stand out, as noted earlier, as symbols of pride in one’s identity and one’s dedication to G-d.

A person who does not appreciate military metaphors should be comforted by the fact that the pseudo-military analogy of Tefillin to a soldier’s uniform is actually an exercise in opposites.

A soldier is trained to be aggressive and macho. A soldier must allow the animal instinct of survival and the quest for victory to dominate. Tefillin, which identify one as a member of G-d’s “army”, restrain the male ego and animal nature. Wearing Tefillin tames our morally weaker side (we wear Tefillin on our left or weaker arm), subjects our emotions to intellectual scrutiny (we wear Tefillin on our head and near our heart) and focuses our intellectual scrutiny on a transcendent G-dly awareness (the Tefillin with G-d’s name are worn above the head and brain) that humbles our ego (which is nurtured by our intellectual superiority over others).

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE BRIDGE

Where do Tefillin Belong?

Judaism has always maintained a dual approach. We serve G-d through Torah study and we serve Him through Mitzvos. One salient difference between the two is that Torah is G-d's way of communicating with us. Every time we learn Torah, G-d is revealing His wisdom to us. Torah has been compared to a love letter. We savor every word and we never get tired of reading and rereading its soothing worlds, no matter what subject it tackles. It's not the subject matter that we get excited about in many instances but the fact that G-d who loves us has sent us some of His ideas.

Mitzvos, by contrast, are about how we connect to G-d. It's what we do—based, of course, on G-d's teachings in the Torah—to connect to Him. The Mitzvos are our means of expressing devotion.

Actually, there is a third category and means of expressing our Jewishness and that is through prayer. Prayer is an even more profound expression of love for G-d. The difference between Mitzvos and prayer is that Mitzvos entail our doing something for the G-d we love and prayer is how we express our deep love for Him and our desire to get close to Him.

Where do Tefillin fit in? In which of the three categories does it belong?

We know that laying Tefillin is certainly a Mitzvah; one (or two, depending on the opinion) of the 613. We also know that Tefillin have been compared to Torah study. Tefillin thus share some of the distinctions of a Mitzvah and some of Torah study.

In fact, Tefillin and Tefilah-prayer have the same basic etymology and they both mean bonding. Moreover, we make a point of wearing Tefillin when we are praying. Thus, Tefillin can fit into all three areas of Judaism.

Mitzvos as Garments

Chassidic thought describes a Mitzvah as a garment and Torah study as food. Tefillin, we shall see, combines both of these traits.

Our souls possess faculties and "garments." Intellect and emotions constitute the faculties of the soul; they define who we are. Thought,

speech and action are the soul's garments. While our intellect and emotions describe what kind of personality we have, thought, speech and action can belie our true feelings.

What then does it mean when we say that thought, speech and action are garments of the soul?

To better understand how thought, speech, and action are our soul's garments it is helpful to speak of physical garments and how they relate to us.

Garments are external to the person, yet they help to communicate some aspects of our physical traits, lifestyle, and even our personality.

A garment is also tailored according to the contours of the person. In that sense, garments reveal something about the anatomy of the person, even though they are not part of the anatomy.

Garments will often reveal a person's state of mind. For example, a person wearing black might be expressing grief, while wearing white is a sign of rejoicing at a wedding. Immodest clothing may be a sign that one is shallow and lacks self-respect, and is trying to flaunt one's body. A neatly tailored and clean garment tells us something about the nature of the person

If we had to sum up the definition of a garment, we would have to express it in paradoxical terms: It is, by definition, external but it is a mirror of the inner person as well.

Similarly revealing are the garments of the soul. When a person performs a Mitzvah with his or her power of action, it reveals the soul's interest. A soul that is in love with G-d will endeavor to fulfill the positive commandments. A person who has fear or respect for G-d will desist from violating the negative commandments. Hence, the action of the Mitzvah reveals the contours and personality of the soul.

Now, the Mitzvah-garment, i.e., the act of the Mitzvah, is G-d's will, which is one with G-d. Hence, whenever we perform a MItzvah, G-d's will becomes an enveloping garment that hugs and embraces us. When a person performs a Mitzvah, the light of the Mitzvah envelops the person.

Tefillin, of course, are no exception to this rule. As occurs with any other Mitzvah, they are a garment in the spiritual sense, a G-dly act that constitutes G-d's will enveloping our soul.

But Tefillin take the idea of a garment a step further.

Tefillin, it may be suggested, highlight their role as the soul's garment because they are also a garment in the physical sense of the word. Unlike most other Mitzvos, Tefillin are actually worn by us the way one wears an ornament. Tefillin are jewelry that adorn our garments and our bodies in the very literal sense of the word. It is axiomatic in Chassidic thought that when the physical act of a Mitzvah mirrors its spiritual nature, it demonstrates that the spiritual aspect of the Mitzvah is even more pronounced. A Mitzvah that involves light generates more spiritual light. A Mitzvah that is physically a unified act is more expressive of the spiritual notion of unity. A Mitzvah that is outwardly joyous generates more Divine joy than other Mitzvos.

Thus, Tefillin which are actually garments and adornments in the physical sense are more reflective of the spiritual aspect of garments.

Mitzvos are regarded as garments in yet another way. They protect us from the potential harm we can suffer due to the powerful light that the Mitzvah generates. As a Mitzvah generates that light it also creates a garment and a shield to protect us from being overwhelmed and shocked by the light's intensity.

In this regard, Tefillin also play an important role, inasmuch as they are referred to as protection and strength. It stands to reason that in addition to the unparalleled protection they afford us from the hostile nations of the world, Tefillin also afford us a higher measure of protection from the harmful effects of the unfiltered Divine energy that is generated by the Mitzvah.

There is yet another way in which Mitzvos are compared with garments. Just as a garment protects us from the cold, so too, Mitzvos protect us from the icy indifference people have to G-d. This coldness is represented by the evil nation of Amalek, which attacked the Jews when they left Egypt. The Torah describes the way they confronted the Jews with the words "Who met you on your way." Our Sages provide an alternate translation: "He cooled you off on the way." Amalek's objective in this world is to desensitize us to spirituality. Mitzvos are garments which protect us from the threat of Amalek.

If Tefillin possess the unparalleled power to defend us against our enemies, it stands to reason that they also have unique power to counter Amalek's physical and spiritual assault.

Moreover, the Rebbe Rashab explains that on a more sophisticated level Amalek is about keeping one's understanding of G-d in the mind and not permitting it to affect the heart. When a person takes a super-intellectual approach to Judaism, a wedge is driven between the mind and the heart.

Tefillin, which are geared specifically to coordinate our minds, hearts and actions, are therefore the most potent of the soul's garments to combat this aspect of Amalek.

It should be noted that this provides us with yet another connection between the Mitzvah of Tefillin and the Final Redemption. One of the prerequisites to building the Third Temple is victory over Amalek. "G-d's very name and throne is not complete until Amalek is defeated." This means that G-d's presence in this world cannot be complete until we defeat the forces of evil, most notably the external as well as the internal Amalek.

If Tefillin play a prominent role in that victory then, by definition, they will play a central role in the building of the Beis Hamikdash, thus bringing about the Messianic Age of Redemption.

Torah as Food

Torah study, by contrast, is referred to as the soul's food. King David speaks of how "Your Torah is in my intestine." Tanya explains at length how Torah, like food, becomes absorbed into our mind when we grasp it intellectually. Torah is ingested and digested by us and it is the ultimate nourishment for the soul. It is therefore said about Torah, "Go eat bread with my bread"

The advantage of Torah study over the performance of a Mitzvah is that the spiritual effects of the Mitzvah merely surround and encompass the person, whereas Torah's light actually penetrates and is fully absorbed by and internalized within the person.

Tefillin: The Best of Both Worlds

Tefillin, the Tzemach Tzedek (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe and ancestor of the Rebbe) explains, likewise, possesses the quality of Torah. Tefillin, are adornments of the head which transcend the quality of other Mitzvos. Like Torah, Tefillin relate to the intellect.

Although consciously one does not necessarily acquire greater knowledge by wearing Tefillin, the soul does acquire a heightened measure of Divine intellectual inspiration that is absent in the performance of other Mitzvos.

In summary: Tefillin is unique in yet another way; it forms the bridge between the two worlds of Torah study and Mitzvah observance. One who wears Tefillin allows himself to be enveloped in G-d's embrace even as he opens up his soul's mind to absorb transcendent G-dly light.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: MAKES A DWELLING PLACE FOR G-D

Reason for Existence

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Tefillin relates to the most significant objective of a Mitzvah. This relates to the very reason G-d created the Universe and why we even exist.

Many philosophers and Kabbalists have grappled with the question, why did G-d have to create a world? Ultimately, this question cannot be answered rationally. Every answer will just beg another question. We must finally come to terms with the fact that G-d, who transcends logic and reason, cannot possibly be comprehended.

While we cannot possibly fathom the "why" of creation, we can and do know the "what" of creation. What was G-d's objective in creating us?

The answer to this question is perhaps the most pervasive subject of Chassidic philosophy. It is based on the words of the Midrash that: "G-d desired a dwelling place in the lowest of worlds." Tanya (the seminal work of Chabad Chassidus authored by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe) expounds on the idea that our Universe is the lowest rung of existence because it does not reflect its G-dly essence. There are multiple higher worlds and dimensions that are more spiritually developed and receptive to G-dly light.

Why would G-d create a world so lowly that it's inhabitants can even deny His existence?

The answer is that G-d wanted us to see through the veil that covers the true reality, which is that our world is no more than a manifestation of G-d's creative power. When we pierce the cover and are exposed to the true reality of the world, the world becomes a place where G-d's presence is revealed.

To elaborate: Our physical existence is simultaneously real and imaginary. It is real in that G-d allows for physical existence; but it is imaginary when it conceals its G-dly nature and essence.

To illustrate: A child sees the door open and a glove drops a toy onto the floor. The child believes that the glove gave him that toy. The child's vision is not impaired; he did indeed see a glove dropping the toy. But his vision is totally wrong. It was not a glove but a hand. And it was not a hand but, rather, the person to whom the hand was attached.

The same infantile way of viewing that scene of the glove depositing a toy is how we view the world around us. We see the effects of G-d's power but not the source.

Indeed, the very word in Hebrew for "world" is "olam" which is a cognate with the word he'alam, meaning concealment. The purpose of this concealment is not to keep us in the dark, but to spur us to pierce the veil of darkness so that this world will become as expressive of G-d as any of the higher spiritual realms, indeed, even more so.

How is this accomplished?

This is where Torah and Mitzvos come in. Every time we perform a Mitzvah that involves a physical act and a physical object, we uncover its true G-dly identity. We thereby make that part of the world which was instrumental in the performance of the Mitzvah fulfill its G-dly mission and remove its obstructive aspect.

Each time a Mitzvah is performed, it removes part of the concealment. The cumulative effect of all the Mitzvos that have ever been done is to, once and for all, allow G-d's plan of making this world a "dwelling place for G-d" come to fruition.

When we finally reach the critical mass needed for this to occur, we will have ushered in the Messianic Age or the Final Redemption. Moshiach, the ultimate Jewish leader, will inspire us to perform what may be the last Mitzvah necessary to bring us over the top and change the world forever. The entire notion of Redemption is predicated on the observance of Mitzvos.

Liberates Sparks

Kabbalah teaches us that there are two spiritual worlds. The world of Tohu (Chaos) preceded our world of Tikkun (Correction). Tohu is characterized as a world in which the energy (light) is too intense to be contained in the available vessels. As a result, the vessels shatter and sparks from these vessels, with their powerful Tohu energy, enter into our world and are embedded in all physical matter.

In the terminology of Kabbalah, the purpose of our lives in this world is to liberate the sparks of holiness embedded in every physical object. Kabbalah and Chassidus place special emphasis on our liberation of sparks during this time of exile. The spiritual object of the exile of the Jewish nation is so that we can reach and refine the holy sparks scattered throughout the world.

When we perform a Mitzvah that involves physical objects, we liberate these embedded sparks and introduce a far more powerful G-dly light into our world than that which exists in one's purely spiritual experiences.

Thus, every Mitzvah that involves physical objects and actions unleashes incredible G-dly energy and transforms the world.

Each Mitzvah plays a specific role in achieving this goal of liberation. In one respect, the Mitzvah that accomplishes the most in affecting the physical world is the Mitzvah of Tzedakah, because it involves giving hard-earned money to the needy. One's entire being is involved in earning that money and all of one's being is thus involved in the pursuit of that Mitzvah.

However, there is something unique about Tefillin in terms of fulfilling the objective of transforming the material world into a dwelling place for G-d.

A Holy Object

First, the object of Tefillin.

Every Mitzvah has an object with which the Mitzvah is performed. For example, when we give a coin to Tzedakah, the coin is the Mitzvah object. When we eat Matzah on Passover, the Matzah is the object with which the Mitzvah is performed. There is no substitute for that object.

However, virtually all of the objects with which we perform a Mitzvah do not endow the Mitzvah with Kedushah. The word Kedushah is difficult to translate into English. It is usually rendered as "holiness," but that word itself needs to be translated.

The best we can do is to give a one or two sentence translation.

Kedushah, when it is attributed to an object, means that the object is qualitatively different from all other non-kedushah objects. Accordingly, it demands that a different level of respect be shown while in contact with that object.

For example, kedushah demands that a Torah scroll be placed in a special ark. It must be held with dignity and honor. It may not be unrolled other than for its intended purpose: reading it in public.

To better understand why we would accord this special status to an inanimate object, let us return to the idea discussed in the very beginning of this chapter. Every part of the Universe is an expression of G-d's creative energy. When we attempt to understand the nature of nature, we must come to the conclusion that it is no more (and no less) than a projection of G-d's power. Nature is a creation of G-d, made to appear to us as if it were an independent fact. If G-d were to let go of His creative power, there would be no object. In effect, the object is non-existent outside of G-d's Being.

Our perception of reality is also a product of G-d's ability to screen His light and give reality an appearance of independence. However, this screen is not a uniformly effective. There are certain objects that utterly obstruct our view of their divine nature. A murder weapon, a text that calls for hatred and the destruction of others, a book that denies G-d's existence, etc., these are the most obstructive of objects since they are set up as the very antithesis of G-d's will. Non-kosher food is included in this category. Because we are Divinely commanded not to partake of these foods, they too are the antithesis of holiness.

Other objects associated with death obscure the life-sustaining and invigorating presence of the Divine. They too are devoid of Kedushah.

There are also neutral objects. Kosher food is a prime example. Tables and chairs, etc., are also objects that can be used in diametrically opposite ways—for good or for evil. While the holiness, i.e., the G-dly connection, is not as obstructed, nevertheless, one cannot readily perceive their G-dly nature.

Occupying the next rung of the ladder of Kedushah are the objects of Mitzvos, such as the coin given to charity or the Tallis with Tztizis. Since they are objects which we use to serve G-d, they do not obscure His presence, yet they hint to a G-dly dimension while not fully revealing their G-dly character.

A holy object is one that, by G-d's own design and designation, is completely transparent. This is what distinguishes the Beis Hamikdash-the Holy Temple from any other place on earth—it is the place where G-d's presence can be felt in the most overt fashion.

The same is true of a G-dly person, a tzadik. He is transparent because of his humility and devotion in every fiber of his being to G-d's will. G-d's presence radiates through the tzadikim .

Of all the Mitzvos that we perform using objects, the three most holy mitzvah objects are the Torah Scroll, Tefillin and Mezuzah, in that order.

Chassidic sources explain that the reason the entire Torah is likened to Tefillin is: “the essential and underlying purpose of every Mitzvah is to introduce the concept of G-d’s oneness below.” This idea is more pronounced in the Mitzvah of Tefillin because the word “echad-one” is actually written on physical parchment… from which we draw an analogy to all the other Mitzvos. Their essential objective also is to introduce the oneness down below.

Although a Torah scroll possesses more Kedushah than Tefillin, nevertheless, Tefillin enjoy an advantage over a Torah Scroll. Unlike the Torah scroll, which is read only at certain times during the week, Tefillin are worn every weekday.

Much more importantly, we read from the Torah but wear the Tefillin on us. This leads us to another aspect of Tefillin and why it is unique in terms of making the physical world a dwelling place for G-d, which we will discuss shortly.

Tefillin are unique even compared to a Mezuzah. In addition to the fact that Tefillin are considered holier than a Mezuzah, the Mezuzah’s own holiness extends only to the scroll itself and not to the case in which it is contained. The case is regarded merely as “an accessory to holiness.” The holiness of the Tefillin, by contrast, extends to their batim-the encasings.

The Uniqueness of the Act of Putting on the Tefillin

The power to introduce G-dly light into the physical world that is most pronounced with Tefillin relates not only to the Tefillin themselves (parchment and leather boxes that are holy) but also extends to the person who wears the Tefillin.

The very act of putting on Tefillin is a transformative experience. Tefillin have the capacity not only to transform the physical objects into a dwelling place for G-d; they can also transform us into a dwelling for G-d, by virtue of their capacity to tame and transform the animal within us.

Tefillin are made up primarily from animal parts. The scrolls are written on parchment; the boxes that contain the scrolls are made of leather. The scroll is tied with a hair of an animal and the boxes are sewn with animal sinews.

The underlying symbolism of the use of animal products in making Tefillin is that the very objective of Tefillin is to elevate and transform even the basest animal instincts we possess.

Furthermore, the Tefillin are placed on our left arm (or for a left handed person, on his weaker right arm) to indicate that the objective of Tefillin is to transform our weaknesses and vulnerabilities into holiness.

Tefillin are placed on our arms near our hearts and on our heads to indicate that every part of our physical existence that can be divided into intellect, emotion and action becomes a dwelling place for the Divine.

No other Mitzvah has this all-encompassing range. Even the Tallis that enwraps us cannot be compared to Tefillin in terms of its effects on us because the Tallis is peripheral; it is not attached to us the way Tefillin are. Tefillin have an unparalleled, internalizing power.

Tefillin In the Head or Tefillin Of the Head?

Thus far we have discussed Tefillin's uniqueness in two distinct ways: First, the object of Tefillin; second, the act of placing the Tefillin on us.

In truth, Tefillin are unique in yet a third way, which is the way the first two elements are combined into one.

The very act of putting on Tefillin is unique. Whereas every Mitzvah involves a physical act (apart from the physical object employed in the performance of the Mitzvah) Tefillin integrate the physical act with the physical object.

To explain: When a person takes a coin—the object of the Mitzvah—and gives it to the needy person—the act of the Mitzvah—the object is the instrument through which the act of the Mitzvah was performed.

With respect to Tefillin the objects becomes part of the person. Tefillin must be worn on—indeed, bound to—the person. The person and the Tefillin become one. Not only do the Tefillin constitute Divine energy manifested in a physical object in the most dramatic fashion, but they extend that holiness to the person who wears the Tefillin.

A story is told of the Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement and the author of the classic work, the Tanya) that he wore Tefillin during his imprisonment. When his jailors saw him with Tefillin, a feeling of fear came upon them. The Alter Rebbe explained the basis of their fear by referring to a statement in the Talmud commenting on the Biblical

verse: "All the nations of the earth shall see the name of G-d called upon you and they will fear you." The Talmud quotes Rabbi Eliezer, who stated that this is a reference to the Head Tefillin. When the nations of the world see a Jew wearing these Tefillin on his head, that evokes a feeling of awe and even fear.

When the Alter Rebbe was queried as to why when other people wore Tefillin it failed to instill fear in the hearts of onlookers. The Alter Rebbe replied that it does not say "Tefillin on the head" but "Tefillin in the head."

In other words, the ideal form of wearing Tefillin is that they are not just bound to us or placed on us, but that they become inseparable from us. The holy object and the person become one.

This discussion can help us shed some light on an enigmatic passage in the Talmud.

When a Jew consciously and willfully fails to observe a Mitzvah, that Jew is obviously referred to as one who has sinned. Sins of omission are also considered sins, albeit of a lesser degree of harshness than sins of commission.

The exception to this rule about sins of omission is the person who consciously and willfully does not wear Tefillin. That person is referred to in the Talmud as "sinners of Israel with their bodies."

What is it about not wearing Tefillin that is considered a bodily sin? After all, the person did not do anything criminal involving his body.

In light of the above, the meaning of the Talmudic enigma becomes clearer. The objective of Tefillin is to bring holiness into the body. That objective defines the Mitzvah of Tefillin. When a Jew fails to wear Tefillin, it deprives not only the soul of its ability to cement its connection to G-d; it also frustrates the body's ability to become holy itself, which is an integral function of the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

Tefillin Creates Converts

There is a fourth aspect of Tefillin relating to the process of making this world a dwelling for G-d.

As we mentioned earlier, the objective of making the world into a dwelling place for G-d is achieved by releasing the powerful energy that is latent in physical objects that originated in the powerful world of Tohu.

This process is seen as the ultimate reason the exile of the Jewish people has been so long. The Talmud states: "Israel was exiled only for the purpose of adding converts."

Chassidus explains that the term "converts" used here can be understood as referring to the sparks of holiness contained within the physical world and which are unable to express their true spirituality. When Jews live in all parts of the world and use the physical objects to perform Mitzvos, they can refine those parts of the world and unleash the latent energy contained in these places.

Our objective of making this world into G-d's dwelling is particularly relevant to the way the non-Jewish world is affected by our Mitzvos. Of all the Mitzvos we do, the Mitzvah that is stated to have a most powerful effect on the nations of the world is the Mitzvah of Tefillin, as it is stated in the Torah: "And all the nations of the world will see the name of G-d called upon you and they shall fear you." This verse, the Talmud states, refers specifically to Tefillin, which have the capacity to instill fear and respect for the Jewish people.

Hence, Tefillin possess incredible power, transforming a) the object, b) the person who lays Tefillin, c) the nations of the world who see, consciously or sub-consciously that a Jew has put on the Tefillin.

Going in Two Directions

Tefillin are generally worn while we recite the Shema and pray. Although prayer and Tefillin are independent Mitzvos, and theoretically one can do one without the other, nevertheless our Sages deemed it necessary to wear Tefillin while we recite the Shema and pray.

Why?

The Talmud provides an analogy for one who reads the Shema and prays without Tefillin. "It is comparable to one who brings a sacrifice without the libations." According to the Torah, the pouring of wine on the Altar had to accompany certain animal sacrifices in the Beis Hamikdash. If one were to bring the sacrifice without the libation it would undermine the integrity of the sacrifice. Here too, if one prays without Tefillin it undermines the power of the prayer.

We must try to understand then, what is the relationship between prayer and Tefillin?

On a linguistic level, both words Tefilah (prayer) and Tefillin share the same root, which means to bind. But there is a fundamental difference

between the manner in which the binding to G-d occurs in prayer and in Tefillin.

Chassidic thought explains that a sacrifice involves taking the fat and blood of the animal and placing them on the Altar, where they will eventually be consumed in the Altar's fire.

This represents the process of elevation. We take a physical object and we transform it into something spiritual.

By contrast, the idea of wine libations on the Altar entailed a reverse process. In the physical sense, while a sacrifice was consumed in the fire that goes upward, the pouring of wine involved the downward motion of the wine. This represents bringing G-dliness into our physical realm, even as it remains a physical entity. And only by way of the downward movement of the libations is the sacrifice with its upward motion pleasing to G-d.

This is the relationship of Tefillin to Tefilah (prayer). Reading of the Shema and prayer involve the outpouring of the soul. The soul is on fire and rises upward to the point that the soul feels incredible G-dly passion. In some extreme cases it can even cause the soul to leave the body to be reunited with its heavenly source. But even in the less intense forms of prayer, the soul, temporarily, seeks to escape the body and the physical world.

While this passion is necessary, it is not the end. It must be followed by the "libation" or the downward movement of the Mitzvos, particularly, Tefillin, which bring G-d into the physical. Indeed, the straps of the Head Tefillin that hang down illustrate this downward process.

In conclusion: Tefillin dramatize the concept of bringing G-d into the physical world in a more pronounced fashion than in any other Mitzvah. This is why the Talmud states: "The entire Torah is compared to Tefillin." Tefillin are the ultimate, paradigmatic Mitzvah.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: RIGHT AND LEFT

Two-Directional Judaism

Judaism is neither right nor left. It is not because it negates these two directions but because it encompasses and embraces both.

Right and left can be understood on many levels, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

In the realm of emotions, the person who is imbued with kindness and love (chesed) is on the right and the person with a more harsh, or judgmental personality is on the left (gevurah).

In the intellectual arena, a person whose intellect is creative and effervescent is said to be on the right in terms of his or her soul's intellectual strength. In Kabbalah that is the faculty of chochma. A person who is into classifying, analyzing and elaborating is said to be on the intellectual left—the faculty of binah.

In the spiritual realm, there are certain Mitzvos that elicit Divine light from G-d's "right" because these Mitzvos involve expressions of love and attachment, such as the Mitzvah to love G-d and love your fellow, giving tzedakah and the like. These Mitzvos are expression of G-d's kindness and "right" side.

When, however, we fulfill the Mitzvah of punishing a criminal, or any other act that expresses judgment, we elicit the corresponding energy of gevurah, which is on the left.

Positive and Negative

In general terms, the division of the Mitzvos into positive and negative commandments is a prime example of the division into right and left, or chesed and gevurah.

The so-called positive or prescriptive commandments (the "dos") are pro-active. They involve taking an object and doing something with it. These Mitzvos are manifestations of G-d's kindness because they are instruments that conduct G-dly light into the world. They are therefore characterized as coming from the right—the hand that symbolizes giving.

The so-called negative or proscriptive commandments (the "don'ts") are associated with the left because they involve the absence of action, a withholding, or withdrawing, from a particular course of action.

Chassidic thought also explains that, in one sense, the observance of a negative commandment is superior to the observance of a positive commandment. When we perform a positive commandment, we can only generate the filtered measure of Divine light that can be contained by our action which is, by definition, finite. This light,

because it is attenuated and contracted, cannot extend to the realm of evil and impurity. One cannot fulfill a Mitzvah with a forbidden substance or by committing a crime. In other words, doing a Mitzvah generates light only in, and to those places, that are receptive to light.

By contrast, the infinite light of G-d can only be elicited by inaction; by refraining from succumbing to a temptation to transgress. Since there is no "container" for this light, it need not be attenuated to fit into an available vessel.

A corollary of this distinction between the positive and negative Mitzvos is that observing a negative commandment, with its resulting generation of unrestrained light, can reach and affect the realm of impurity and evil. The only way we can elevate the sparks of holiness that are embedded within evil is by shunning that evil through observing the negative Mitzvah, with its generation of infinite light. This light is utterly transformative.

Chanukah and Tefillin: Positive and Negative/Infinite Energy

The Rebbe demonstrates that the rabbinic Mitzvah of lighting Chanukah lights has the distinction of combining both qualities. This is power it "inherits" from and is modeled after the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

Kindling the Chanukah lights is obviously a positive act—lighting a Menorah. It certainly qualifies as an act that generates positive energy. Yet, Chanukah lights, simultaneously and paradoxically, possess the quality of the observance of a negative commandment because they have the capacity to reach into and transform even the forces of evil, impurity and darkness.

Chanukah lights, unlike other positive Mitzvos, are performed outside and are placed on the left side of the doorway. The symbolism of these peculiarities is that the "outside" and the "left" are symbols of the negative forces that are beyond the realm of holiness. The Chanukah lights have the capacity to illuminate even those forces.

Indeed, the Rebbe continues, what makes this Mitzvah unique is that the very positive act of lighting the Menorah performs the paradoxical function of generating both positive energy, which can be contained, and infinite energy that can affect even the outside and the left.

This duality originates in the Mitzvah of Tefillin. Tefillin too, are a composite of right and left. They are a positive, pro-active Mitzvah, like many other of the hundreds of Mitzvos. They also have the quality of a negative Mitzvah, in that they are worn on the left/weaker arm, symbolizing their reach into the lower left realm.

The uniqueness of Tefillin (and Chanukah lights) in this regard is that whereas negative commandments affect the realms of impurity, they do so by negating them and "pushing them away." Tefillin (and Chanukah lights) actually affect them in a positive fashion, by engaging and "attacking" them with positive energy and thereby causing them to be refined.

We thus see that the uniqueness of the Mitzvah of Tefillin is that they combine the best of both worlds.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE TOTAL MITZVAH

Capturing the Essence of Judaism

What single word would you use to describe the uniqueness and essence of Judaism?

Many would choose words like: G-d, Torah, love, Israel, etc., and they are all correct answers, but those words do not define what is unique about them.

My choice for that single word would be "totality." If I had to use two words I would say: "All encompassing."

Judaism is not a religion in the conventional sense of the world. For religion connotes dedicating a special time in a special place, and a special emotion to doing a special thing for a special G-d.

Judaism is about dedicating all of time, and all of places, all of our faculties and all of our actions to an all-encompassing G-d. Judaism does not recognize compartmentalization. The Torah has guidance for us in every aspect of our lives.

The terms "totality" or "all-encompassing" can be understood on many levels.

Mind and Heart

One application of this concept is the way Tefillin involve all of the major human faculties. Tefillin are placed on the head and on the arm near the heart to indicate that we must dedicate our mind and our

emotions to G-d in addition to our actions. This is indeed the central idea of Tefillin.

Thought, Speech and Action

Another application of this concept of totality is the way Tefillin are a composite of what, in Chassidic parlance, is known as the three "garments of the soul": thought, speech and action. While every Mitzvah has these three components, we shall see that they are more pronounced with Tefillin.

While action is the most important part of a Mitzvah, every Mitzvah also involves speech and thought. The thought is the intention to do a Mitzvah and the concentration on the meaning of the Mitzvah (Kavvanah). Most Mitzvos require us to recite a blessing before doing the Mitzvah.

However, the Mitzvah of Tefillin is unique in comparison to all other Mitzvos with respect to the total involvement of all of our souls' garments.

As mentioned above the need for kavvanah-thought is more crucial for Tefillin than for any other Mitzvah. With regard to the other Mitzvos, thought is an independent element that enhances the Mitzvah. With respect to Tefillin, it is an integral and inseparable part of the Mitzvah.

One may argue that the indispensable and inseparable nature of kavvanah-thought is not unique to Tefillin, but applying as well to Tzitzis and Sukkah. Nevertheless, the Rebbe demonstrates that Tefillin are still unique in this regard. The Festival of Sukkos occurs only once a year (albeit for seven days); Tzitzis are only Biblically mandated when one wears a four-cornered garment. Tefillin, however, apply each and every weekday. And although we do not wear Tefillin on Shabbos and Yom Tov, the Rebbe explains, that the "Signs" of Shabbos and Yom Tov take the place of Tefillin.

The Rebbe adds another point:

Human needs are divided into three categories: Shelter, clothing and food which becomes one's flesh and blood. A Sukkah is only a temporary shelter; it does not define the person. Tzitzis are only garments; though they are worn on the person they are also not a part of the person. Tefillin correspond to food that becomes an integral part of the person, inasmuch as Tefillin are a personal obligation; they are a part of the person, akin to the food that is integrated within the person.

The Rebbe also adds that the Talmudic statement that equated Tefillin to all of the commandments is intended to challenge us to take the uniqueness of Tefillin and instill it in the observance of all the other Mitzvos. This challenges us to take the preeminent role that thought and speech play in the performance of the Mitzvah of Tefillin and apply it to all of our Mitzvos.

Encompasses All Three Categories

Another aspect of Tefillin that exemplifies the idea of wholeness is the fact that Tefillin encompass all three categories of Mitzvos. As discussed above Mitzvos are divided into three categories of Chukim-transrational, Eidos-testimonial and Mishpatim-rational.

Tefillin are unique in that they incorporate elements of all three. As discussed previously, the placing of the Tefillin on the arm before laying the head Tefillin underscores the idea of doing before understanding, a salient feature in the realm of Chukim. Likewise, the meditation that accompanies the donning of Tefillin by which one surrenders his heart and mind to G-d is integral to Chukim.

Tefillin are also worn in response to G-d's own wearing of Tefillin, which is a metaphor for His love for us. Tefillin also contain the mention of the Exodus. By putting on Tefillin, we are expressing gratitude for G-d's abiding love and for His liberation of the Jewish people. Expression of gratitude is most certainly a rational matter.

And, Tefillin are, of course, first and foremost in the category of Eidos-testimonies, because they are a sign and a remembrance of G-d's unity and of the Exodus.

Combines: Mitzvah, Torah and Prayer

Tefillin, as noted earlier are the bridge that encompasses and unites Mitzvos with Torah and Tefilah-prayer.

There are Mitzvah elements, Torah elements and prayer elements in Tefillin, arguably the only Mitzvah that can make that claim.

Tefillin are thus unique in their comprehensiveness. They combine the totality of our faculties and garments with the totality of the Mitzvah dynamic.

Tefillin are thus well suited to be the catalyst for ushering in the Age of totality, the Age of Moshiach, when the entire world will be "filled with the knowledge of G-d as the seabed is covered with water."

CHAPTER TWENTY: WOMEN AND TEFILLIN

The Big Question

By this point it is demonstrably clear that Tefillin play a fundamental role in Judaism; they are central to Jewish practice and are unique in so many ways.

The question that many have wished to ask, in light of all that has been stated above about the spiritually desirability and uniqueness of Tefillin, is: Why are women exempted from this extraordinary Mitzvah, and why are they not, at least, encouraged to perform it?

Before we analyze the Torah's approach to the respective and complementary roles of men and women, let us first document the sources that exempt and discourage women from laying Tefillin.

As mentioned earlier, the Torah exempts women from most time-bound Mitzvos. These include: reading the Shema, hearing the Shofar, taking the Lulav, eating in a Sukkah, counting the Omer, wearing Tzitzis and laying Tefillin. With the exception of the last two Mitzvos, women are encouraged to observe the others and many have accepted their performance as volitional, personal obligations.

Why were women exempted from these last two commandments?

The first and most important reason is that it is G-d's will, as transmitted by G-d to Moses on Mount Sinai and later passed on orally until finally being committed to writing in the Mishnah and Talmud.

If one does not accept the premise that the Torah—both Written and Oral—are Divine, then no explanation will satisfy a woman who believes that a group of chauvinistic men made up the rules so as to perpetuate their ancient patriarchy. Obviously, this book was not intended to persuade someone who does not seek to learn and understand.

For those who do believe in the Divine origin of the Mitzvos, as did their forebears for thousands of years, no explanation is really necessary.

However, as stated earlier in this book, Judaism comprises both na'aseh-we will do, followed by nishma-we will listen/understand. As important as it is to surrender our will to G-d's will as a prerequisite to observing the Mitzvos, it is important that it be followed by attempting to understand the Mitzvos to the extent that is humanly possible.

In addition to the importance of understanding the Mitzvos, the reasons given also serve to teach us invaluable lessons. The reason, then, assumes a life of its own.

In that spirit, many explanations have been advanced to explain why women were exempted from certain Mitzvos.

The reason women are exempted from time-bound Mitzvos generally is that it might conflict with their most important Mitzvah: to take care of their family and build a Jewish home.

The more philosophical and mystical writings on Judaism state that women do not have a spiritual need to perform these Mitzvos. As we shall see, this is particularly true for Tefillin. When we analyze the rationale for them, we can see that it is unnecessary for women to put Tefillin on.

Let's examine the reasons for the Mitzvos we have explored throughout this book and demonstrate how these reasons do not apply to women, and how the observance of these Mitzvos would actually be redundant for women:

Direct and Indirect Homemaking

We can divide the reasons for performing Mitzvos in general into several categories: First, our highest purpose is to make a home for G-d in this world. This we achieve by doing Mitzvos, particularly Tefillin. But Tefillin are not physically tied to the concept of a home.

By contrast, women actually engage in creating dwelling places for G-d in the home and they do it full-time, whether they work outside the home or not. When they run a Jewish home, in the most literal sense of the word, they don't need an indirect way of creating a home for G-d. As mentioned earlier, a Mitzvah that physically parallels its spiritual goal achieves that goal to a much heightened degree. For example, lighting Chanukah lights physically does more than other Mitzvos in terms of illuminating the world with spiritual light.

Hence, women who are straightforwardly involved in creating G-dly homes on Earth by combining spiritual ideals with their homemaking don't need Mitzvos that accomplish that goal indirectly.

Self-Disciplined

One reason for laying Tefillin is for men to discipline and refine themselves. Women, we are taught by the Sages, do not need the same external reinforcement to tackle their Animal nature, because women have a more refined Animal nature to begin with. More importantly, women have greater access to their souls and their faith in G-d and they experience fewer spiritual obstructions. Tefillin would be superfluous for them.

If the reason men lay Tefillin is about liberation of their souls, women once again have a natural spiritual advantage. The cover over their souls is a lighter burden which they can more easily remove without the need for Tefillin.

That women have greater access to their souls is demonstrated by the Torah's accounts of the sin of the Golden Calf and the debacle of the spies sent into Cana'an. According to our tradition, not one woman participated in those rebellious movements, even as they spearheaded the efforts to contribute towards the construction of the Mishkan, G-d's portable home in the desert. Their faith was not covered as it was for the men.

If the reason men lay Tefillin is to emulate and create a bond with G-d, women have that bond naturally. This means that women can draw on their internal spirituality and faith to create the same bond that men need external Mitzvos to create.

If the reason men lay Tefillin is that it is G-d's will that they do so, since the Torah exempts women, that means it is not G-d's will for them.

If the reason men lay Tefillin is to serve as a sign that they are proud Jews, women do not need that sign, just as they don't need the sign of circumcision. The Talmud states "A woman is as if she was circumcised."

Public Versus Private Role in Judaism

To better understand the significance of a "sign" and the reason women do not need it, we must recognize that there are two distinct areas of endeavor in Judaism: there is what we do in the private domain and that which we do in public.

In virtually all societies, the people who occupy the public role are considered most successful. Who are the people that most Americans adulate? Movie stars, athletes, wealthy corporate executives, pop

artists and powerful leaders. We envy them, and despite all of our protestations to the contrary, we put them on a pedestal.

Thus, in the hierarchy of societal values, the person who cannot or does not achieve these milestones is said to be a second class citizen.

In Judaism, the public role was never viewed as the pinnacle. And it was consistently a role that the greatest and most noble people shunned. The greatest of our leaders—and the only ones whose existence we still know about—were adamantly opposed to becoming public and famous figures. Moses, the first Jewish leader, argued with G-d because he did not want the job, nor did he feel he merited it. More recently, the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Rebbe both protested vehemently at the suggestion that they assume the mantle of leadership.

What does this point to?

In the Jewish value system, the private and internal role is considered to be the superior and more coveted position. Even the people who are thrust into leadership live a determinedly private life of spirituality that they try to hide from the public.

Generally speaking, men have assumed the more public roles and the necessary evil of leadership. Even though most men are not leaders, they are expected to function in an outside, superficial and even hostile, world, where they are in constant contact with the ugliest aspects of humanity and life. The elemental task of earning a living is fraught with moral and ethical pitfalls. The man's role is to tame the outside world, even as he must struggle not to be engulfed by it.

To support men as they struggle with their roles, they were given certain institutions and Mitzvos.

The synagogue, for example, is an institution "devised" to provide men with an oasis in the otherwise unrefined and uncouth world. Surely, women are obliged to pray, but they do not need the fraternal power of nine other fellow worshippers in an insular structure to survive spiritually.

From the perspective of outside secular and religious cultures, women's role in Judaism is clearly unequal to that of men. The thinking is that as the ideal roles are in the public arena, and women are not well represented there, then they have clearly been given an inferior role.

The Jewish value system is unique and does not fit neatly within the assumptions of these other cultures; it has a diametrically opposite

view about what constitutes a superior role. Judaism goes on record asserting that women, who are more proficient in nurturing their inner spirituality and that of their family members, occupy a most exalted position in the hierarchy of values in Jewish life. While she may not receive the same measure of public recognition and acclaim, the Jewish woman's role and contribution is directly in line with G-d's overarching purpose for our very existence.

When we speak of a woman's place as being in the home, it doesn't mean that a woman is confined to a specific building, but that wherever she is, it is the internal dimension of Judaism that she experiences and inspires in others.

Women, therefore, do not need to show their Jewishness by assuming the external Mitzvah of Tefillin. Their "sign" is an internal spirituality that transcends time.

A simple analogy to art may be useful. If an artist is indeed a genius, does the visitor to an art gallery really need a sign underneath the painting to tell him that it is a masterpiece? A woman, the Torah tells us, was sculpted by G-d from Adam, whereas Adam was made from the earth itself. Man is, by nature, uncouth and unspiritual (though there are, of course, exceptions). Man's job is to tame himself and the earth (read: the outside environment). The Mitzvos they perform help transform them and the world around them into works of art. They, however, need a sign that tells themselves and others with whom they interact in the public arena, who are not art connoisseurs, "I am a Jew! I am connected to G-d! I want some of my spirituality to rub off on the outside world."

Women are already works of art (there are some exceptions here as well) and do not need to be reminded of it by a sign. They ought not to be forced to thrust themselves into the public arena. Nor do they have to show an uncouth public that they are connected to G-d. Moreover, even when in the public arena, the Jewish woman who follows the Torah's laws of modesty is far more capable of dramatically demonstrating her proud Jewish identity. The people with whom she interacts see that Judaism is neither shallow nor skin deep.

All of the above may sound patronizing or like an excuse to some women, who may doubt that their special nature and access to spirituality are sincerely acknowledged and documented. However, these positive statements are based on many earlier sources (see footnotes 1-16 in this chapter, for example). The teachings of Kabbalah and Chabad Chassidus are particularly noteworthy here, as they point to the belief that the feminine will be the dominant trait in

the Messianic Age, and further, that this reality is already present today, albeit in a more concealed state.

Three Special Mitzvos for Women

In addition to all of the above, one of the reasons women are exempted from time-related Mitzvos is that they more than make up for their lack of observance of these few Mitzvos by adhering to their three special Mitzvos.

But, first, we must clear up a misconception. There are 613 commandments in the Torah. There is a misconception that women are obligated to perform only 3 out of the 613. That is absolutely absurd. Women are obligated in virtually all of the 613, except for about a dozen from which they are exempted. And as to those dozen, they are encouraged to fulfill them voluntarily. The only exceptions are Tallis and Tefillin, as we will soon elaborate.

Then what is all the fuss made of the three special Mitzvos given to women?

The answer is that these Mitzvos are actually just as much the obligation of the man as they are the obligation of the woman. What makes these Mitzvos special for women is that, despite the fact that men are also obligated to light candles before Shabbos (if there are no women in the house), separate challah (if they make the bread), and observe the laws of family purity, these Mitzvos were embraced particularly by women, who have assumed a greater role in their execution than the men.

These three Mitzvos epitomize all that Judaism is about. They are geared to bring purity, holiness and light into one's home and into the world. These three goals are fulfilled most dramatically with these Mitzvos:

Family purity and Mikveh ensure the spiritual purity of the marriage, children, home and community.

Challah separation—which involves separating a piece of dough from the batter and burning it—is an expression of holiness, which in Jewish terms means "dedicated to something Higher." The Mitzvah of Challah is emblematic of all the laws of Kashrus, which are designed to make our food and our bodies holy. When all of what we eat conforms to G-d's will, the energy we derive from the food will go towards making our lives more dedicated to G-d and His commandments.

Lighting candles before Shabbos and Jewish Holidays is the woman's way of bringing G-dly light into her home, and from there to the entire world. The connection with G-d afforded by the performance of this Mitzvah, bringing light and the experience of Shabbos into her home and making special private prayers, epitomizes the experience of performing a Mitzvah with joy.

Because women are engaged in Mitzvos that are demonstrative of Judaism's main goals, they compensate many times over for the few Mitzvos that they are not obligated to do or cannot do.

Why Can't Women Volunteer?

Why, many will ask, why can a woman not put on Tefillin? Granted she is not obligated to do it and she may not be lacking anything by virtue of her failure to do it, but why can't she do it voluntarily? Aren't women encouraged to hear the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah despite the fact that they are exempted from the obligation to hear it?

The answer lies in the unique nature of Tefillin. It is the only Mitzvah that involves placing an object that is holy—because it contains G-d's name—on our bodies. Tefillin, therefore, require great effort to avoid distraction and levity while wearing them, and to maintain a clean mind and body all the time we wear them.

Because Tefillin possess such sanctity, and we are warned not to do anything that might compromise their integrity, people stopped wearing Tefillin all day long, which was the original custom. The risk of abusing the Tefillin outweighs the advantage of wearing them throughout the day.

If one is not obligated to wear Tefillin, it is wrong to volunteer to do so, because in doing so, one risks compromising the sanctity of Tefillin. Only one who has an outright obligation to wear the Tefillin is allowed to take that risk. This is so for two reasons:

First, despite the danger, one cannot shirk an obligation. One just has to make a more concerted effort to maintain the proper state of mind and body.

Second, the fact that G-d has commanded us to perform this Mitzvah, obviously knowing the risk involved, means that G-d gave us the added assistance to do the Mitzvah properly. One who does not have the obligation, however, does not receive the added assistance to maintain the highest levels of purity. Every command in the Torah is also an issuance of a license. You must, therefore, you can.

Not Left Out

In conclusion, women need not feel left out of the Mitzvah of Tefillin because they are already sanctified, by virtue of their natural, superior feminine spiritual energy and the enhanced effects of their three special Mitzvos.

The woman who is driven to get closer to G-d by way of Tefillin can do so vicariously. If her goal is to copy men, then it is not a G-dly quest. If it is, as is the case with most women, a desire to foster a deeper, more overt and external relationship with G-d, she can achieve this goal without actually putting them on.

According to the great Kabbalist, the Arizal, women can observe Tefillin vicariously if their husbands—who are their soul partners—lay Tefillin.

When a woman encourages and inspires her father, brother, husband, son, etc., to wear Tefillin, the mitzvah is in her merit just as if she herself had put on the Tefillin. If a woman contributes to a Tefillin fund that assists those who cannot afford to purchase a pair of their own Tefillin, she receives the merit of putting on Tefillin, along with the Mitzvah of Tzedakah.

Epilogue

Men who wish to give the Bar Mitzvah boy a real, enduring gift should make a commitment to increase their own observance of Tefillin. This can mean laying Tefillin regularly, putting them on properly, checking them periodically to see if they are still kosher, etc. There can be no greater and more meaningful celebration of a Bar Mitzvah than showing the young man that his simcha had a ripple effect.

May we see the ripple effect of our collective efforts in regard to this special Mitzvah and to all the others to which this Mitzvah will lead. The cumulative power of all these powerful Mitzvos will surely break through the final barrier to the Final Redemption.

May we all see how G-d’s Tefillin—the Jewish people—are redeemed and true peace and G-dly light extend to Israel and the entire world.